



*By the same Author :*

**SURFACE!**

**BURY THE PAST**

**OLD MOKE**

# *NO MAN'S MISTRESS*

A NOVEL

*by*

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*Any similarity or apparent connection between characters in this story and actual persons, whether alive or dead, is purely coincidental.*



TO R. G. H.

*Dear Snake,*

*As some return for your having lent me your Midshipman's Journal, I am sending you this nautical entertainment. In case you should be misled by the title, I should explain that the lady in question is the sea, the 'oggin, a sort of 'Belle Dame sans Merci'.*

*My only criticism of your journal is that you failed to record the removal of the inn-sign from the 'Pig and Whistle' at Port Tewfik: nor could I find a mention of our subsequent arrest by the naval patrol. You omitted, too, any reference to a nocturnal raid on a certain police headquarters in Malta. So I have followed your line and left these matters unrecorded, except in my memory, which holds them dear.*

*Yours,*

A. F.



## *Chapter 1*

THIS was a moment I had wanted. I had seen it many times during the past few years, but only as a dream, thinking: Next year perhaps—next year or the one after? I had seen it in the dancing flames of the fire when I had sat for an hour or two after a hard day's work on my land, seen it each year when the gold-lettered invitation card in its white envelope had come flopping through my letter-box, escorted usually by half-a-dozen smaller, buff-enveloped demands for immediate payment. And it was with a thought to these unpaid bills and to an undiminished overdraft that I had always declined the invitation. After all, it would be an expensive luxury. The ticket alone would account for a couple of guineas, then there'd be a train fare and a night at a pub in Portsmouth. (I say a pub, but it wouldn't be just any one of the many Pompey taverns. It'd be the 'Barrel o' Beef' and a room looking over the harbour entrance, across the tide to the high, stern walls of the Fort.) Then there'd be drinks to pay for—a man can hardly meet old shipmates without pushing out a few boats.

Those would be the main expenses. But there were others, unseen, unguessed at. The last time that I'd seen my single-ender black tie had been the day I'd lent it to—well, someone or other, for a Hunt Ball. I needed a new shirt, too, because of a nasty run of black coffee across the chest of the only sound one I had. (In those

days I was doing my own laundry, and the stain had resisted my amateur attack upon it.) I wasn't even sure of my half-boots, though I felt that when I'd knocked the dust off them they could be buffed up sufficiently to hide the holes in my socks. The socks would not be a matched pair, but that, as I had learnt as a young and hardly prosperous naval officer, was a considerable argument in favour of half-boots over any other kind of footwear. Socks aren't seen, in half-boots: they aren't even necessary.

So, every year since I'd resigned my commission in His (now Her) Majesty's Navy, I had been sent that invitation to the summer ball at Fort Blockhouse, the submarine headquarters, and each year I'd replied to the secretary with my regrets, propped the card with its little gold dolphin crest on the mantelpiece, and watched it there each evening with genuine sadness until the night came for the ball. That night I'd allow myself an extra tot while I sat alone by the fire, thought about my friends and wondered again whether I'd done the right thing in swallowing my private anchor. And, with all the regrets, I thought I had. Each man has his own yardstick in his mind, his own sense of his proper road. Now I had my acres, and I loved them: they were mine, and they owned me as much as I owned them. This was something very personal, and it was worth a mental tear or two to have it.

I look at it this way: that there is a great link, a natural comradeship, between men whose lives are bound in the sea and those who are one with the land. But while the land is a pliable beast, is understandable, answers to reason and can be tamed, the sea is a vicious, uncontrollable body which knows no laws and acknow-

ledges no faith. It demands so much and pays so often in heartbreak: this I have seen. On my land I am master, and know that what I do this year will bring me satisfaction in the years that follow. But the sea has no reckoning of anything that I or my friends or our fathers have ever done: even Nelson, master of men and of fleets, could never call himself the master of the sea. Not even in his own stomach.

Perhaps these are all easy excuses to cover my own homesickness. Perhaps in my heart I am sad, making the most of what I have to drown a more genuine sorrow, a sense of loss. In any case, the wondering is a waste of time: I have here under my feet the thing I chose of my own free will—yes, even fought for!—and I am here with my choice. Any savouring of regrets is wilful sentimentality, and there is no place for that either at sea or on the land.

Each year on the night of the ball I have thought of these things, and sipping my toddy, I have remembered my friends and thought: No, not yet; I am not yet sure enough of my new life to face the old. And in the morning I have torn the card across and dropped its halves among the ashes in the grate, and in my heart faced another year as though it were Christmas that had come and gone. But this year, holding the card in my right hand and its square, shiny envelope in my left, I knew that I could go. My overdraft was smaller, the unpaid bills were a mere trickle compared to last year's spate. I would not be ashamed, now, to meet my old friends: there and then I sat down and wrote out an acceptance. I noticed as I did so that the secretary still called me 'Lieutenant, R.N.' But I had been away for long enough to forget it, and I put myself down plainly,

in block letters, JAMES WENTWORTH. I was asked to state, would I be arriving by car or by boat? By boat, of course. From the 'Barrel o' Beef' I could take a taxi to the Vernon steps. Vaguely I tried to recall the telephone number of the Southsea taxi firm that we had used. . . .

Forgive me for being so long-winded. But, you see, to get to my story—to Peter Tregarth's story, that is—I wanted this perspective, to let you see it as it came to me. At that Summer Ball, at Blockhouse.

I was late. Already the parade-ground was packed with cars, and there was a dense crowd in the alley-way between the workshops, where braziers glowed against the evening's chill and glasses clinked softly, cheerfully, below the sound of three dance-bands and a thousand voices. Among the thousand owners of those voices I looked for faces that I knew. But there seemed to be none. All the time I had felt this as a homecoming, and now I stood first at one bar and then at another, searching for my friends, moving and pausing again while my glass was filled, not wanting yet to drink, but only using the bars as centres for my search. These bars were rigged on trestled tables, served by young officers in shirt-sleeves: they were too young for me ever to have served with them at sea. And I saw youngsters, too, with two stripes on their arms—lieutenants—and, out of habit, glancing at their left shoulders to see where they had served, I was astonished to see no ribbons. It had never occurred to me that a man could reach the rank even of lieutenant and not have seen something of the war! I felt old, seeing them, and thought immediately of Mary-Ann—how she'd have laughed, to see me feel-



ing old at thirty! And it was the thought of her that brought me near to panic—the panic of desertion, of utter loneliness in familiar surroundings. I held out my glass, suddenly empty, to the lad behind the bar.

“Water?” he asked.

I told him: “And gin,” and he laughed. The gin was taken for granted. I thought: Times have changed, but not that much.

“Thanks.”

I took the glass from him, and at that moment I saw a familiar face. Young Ferris—he’d been the Sub of *Seahound*, when I was her Number One.

“Ferris. Isn’t it time you had a brass hat?” He’d grown up: there was a straightness, a knowledge of himself which hadn’t been in his eyes in the old *Seahound* days.

“Well, I’ll be b——!” Ferris turned quickly to the girl behind him. “Sorry—old friend.”

I smiled at her, and she stood feigning patience while we shook hands, and I thought: He hasn’t changed—not really. He’s still here in the Straits with his scruffy, adolescent beard and his queerly personal hatred of the Japs. To me, now, he wasn’t a lieutenant in smart mess undress: he was a Sub, wearing a khaki shirt with one sleeve ripped off, and when the sweat ran down over his eyes he wiped it away with a hand that left a broad streak of cordite black across his forehead. I brought myself to earth—this was 1953.

“Not even a half-stripe?”

His smile was an apology.

“Due for it in December,” he told me. “Bad boy on courses, you know. The hell. You drinking? Where’s Mary-Ann?”

I didn't answer the last question! Only drained my glass and let him have it filled for me.

I said: "Shocking thing about Hallet."

He nodded as he handed me my glass, and the girl, who had closed up between us, raised her thin eyebrows at him. But he hadn't forgotten her—the 'barman' was working hard, and, with him gin-and-water came more easily than the same with lime-juice.

I reminded Ferris: "You haven't introduced us. Don't worry—it was always you who pinched my girl friends, not the other way about." I told her: "My name's Wentworth—Jimmy Wentworth."

Ferris broke in, talking to her: "Jimmy had the sense to get out while the going was good."

That wasn't true, and I told him: "Nonsense. It'd break your heart, and you know it. Only with me there were other—well, it was different."

"You always said you would. Doing well?"

"Scraping a living. Look, don't let me spoil your fun. But before you go, tell me—any of my lot here tonight? Or have they all been chucked out?"

Ferris stared at the canvas awning as though he expected to see the men of my time hanging there from the wire stay. He brought up his left hand with the glass in it and used the thumb to scratch the side of his jaw. I thought, warmly: He caught that trick from Arthur Hallet. Odd, a man never really dies. And with a sudden strike of the old lasting pain I thought: Neither does a woman. Never. God gives us the joy of a love, and if it's a good enough love—the sort that can't be described by the stupid little overworked word spelt L-O-V-E—He gets His own back on us by turning the thing into a hurt. Perhaps that isn't fair to Him, though;

perhaps the very pain is a solace in that it keeps alive what was and lived. A man can't judge what he still feels.

Ferris told me: "Tregarth was here, earlier on."

Peter Tregarth! We'd been kids together at Dartmouth, and we'd served together as midshipmen in the Mediterranean before we joined submarines at the same time. I hadn't seen him since '43, but I could honestly say that he was my oldest friend. I don't mean acquaintance, brother-officer: I mean *friend*.

• "Peter? Peter Tregarth?"

Ferris nodded, not meeting my eye.

"He's around, somewhere."

There was a flatness in his tone, an awkwardness of manner. I caught it at once.

"Anything wrong with him?"

Ferris started Arthur's scratching routine all over again.

He told me:

"He's got *Trace* now. I was his Number One for a few months before I went to the C.O.'s course. Didn't particularly want it, but I wasn't sorry to leave *Tracer*."

"Why?"

I looked at Ferris, hard, not trying to look hard, but only wanting a straight answer. Ferris finished his drink.

"Friend of yours, Jimmy. So'm I. Let's leave it alone. Other half?" He pointed at my glass.

All right, I thought. I can't force it; I don't want to. Only that they're both my friends and I've come to a reunion and I didn't expect—all right, I told myself; shut up and leave it. The girl was looking restive, and she was bored with me. She'd come here to dance, not to listen to old friends gassing.

I told Ferris: "You two be off. I'll go and look for Peter."

Ferris seemed diffident now, as though he felt he had some duty to look after me. The girl was giving him hell with her eyes.

I asked him: "So you've done the C.O.'s course. And now?"

"Reserve Group. I take one of the boats to sea each week. Crew of conscripts—National Service men. I'm supposed to keep the boats in shape and at the same time train a lot of ignorant, disinterested cusses who only want to finish their time and get home to Mum. Honestly, it's bloody awful. It's like——" He was warming to his subject, but the girl put a hand on his arm and gave him a smile that would have melted a tractor. He stopped short, and told me: "See you presently, Jimmy."

So I went in search of Tregarth. In this search I didn't stop at the bars for anything except to look, and while I didn't see Peter, I didn't see anyone else I knew, either. Oh, an Admiral, yes—but my only personal contact with him had been an occasion when he'd told me to get my hair cut. From my brief and occasional meetings with admirals I had an impression that their chief occupation was the study of junior officers' heads, and so, while I knew this one's face well and had a considerable admiration for his service record, I hardly felt closely enough acquainted to offer him a drink. Although, thinking back on it, I had last seen him as our official guest at a Blockhouse dinner, and after the dinner he'd spent an hour on his feet on top of the bar singing dirty songs in schoolboy French. We'd been

lucky with our submarine admirals: perhaps they gave us the pick of the bunch.

I didn't know any of this crowd. I began to realise, fighting a childish and unreasonable bitterness which I couldn't altogether suppress, that I was out, and had been out for too long to come back and find what I had left. It was all different, and I was a stranger on his own, an oddity in a dinner-jacket and without a partner. Standing there at the bar in a tent on the lawn behind the Mess, I tried to look at ease and happy. Without thinking of it, I finished a new glass in one swallow, and, shocked at my own behaviour, I apologised my way out to the open air, found that I was staring down across the jetty's length to the crossing 'T' of it where the submarines lay moored side-by-side in their trots. And there, at last, were familiar faces! These were my friends, and their faces didn't change. They were all there, the T-boats and the S-boats and a few less familiar 'A's' flaunting their three tall periscope standards as signs of post-war progress. I thought: The hell to progress, to new faces and new looks! I was walking down that jetty to meet old friends. The bitterness had gone, replaced by warmth and a bite of nostalgia. I turned left at the junction of the T, and in a moment I was on the wooden planking rounding the back of the P.O.'s Mess towards the farther trots of the Reserve Group.

These submarines, in a sort of semi-commission, were not as well groomed as their more fortunate neighbours lower down the creek. Obviously they had less individual attention—only one crew and a minimum of paint to a number of craft. I stopped, looking down at that whole solid block of ships which had served their

country and their crews so well in so many battles; and as I glanced across the nearest trot I saw something more than just a submarine. There was no light by which I could read her name, but that smooth curve, that 'cab' on the front of her bridge, were unmistakable. There lay *Seahound* herself, unbroken after all, intact, living, slightly neglected, but still—*Seahound*! I had imagined her broken up, torn apart by hard, unfeeling hands and tools: yet all this time she had been afloat, spared, as she indeed deserved to be, to feel the tide and to remember—even as I, a farmer, did—the small proud glories of a recent past. To this port we had brought her when we returned from the war in the East, and even now I remembered the thunder of those cheers which echoed across the water from the Fort as we slid for the last time into Base. A victors' welcome. And how she'd known it! Because she was the real victor: it was she who had carried us, and on her strength it was that our lives had rested. Even lying here, neglected, she lived: still she rubbed shoulders with her sisters, still listened to the murmur of the tide.

I crossed the narrow plank, and I stroked the peeling paint-work of her gun: almost it felt hot under my hand, as it had so often to the cost of an enemy when she had risen from the sea and done her work of destruction. By the light of a single naked bulb which glared from the head of the brow on the timber jetty, I looked to the front of her bridge, and for a moment I saw her Captain, Hallet, leaning over, shielding his eyes from the tropical sun and shouting an order to the gun's crew here below. But there was only rust, and a rope's end flapping. . . .

I pulled my thoughts together, turned for'ard along

the casing and stepped down to the fore-hatch. Again I was away!—how often I'd used these three steel steps! I leant my weight with my hands on the hatch's upper rim, and my feet found the top of the ladder without having to feel for it. They knew where to go. In the old days I'd had no use, much, for ladders—not going down: and the habit moved me now. I swung by my hands from the hatch, dropped heavily on my heels in the pitch-black for'ard compartment.

Standing there in the dark with the smell of old paint-work, shale and damp, I struck a match. But it showed me nothing before it fizzled out without ever a flame. And as I fumbled in the box for another, my eyes now more use to me in the dark, I thought I saw a glimmer of light. It was reflected into my eyes from the brass rim of a valve-wheel on the deckhead, and I thought that the light it reflected must surely come from the lamp on the jetty, shining down into the hatch. But I looked up through the hatch, and there was no ray of that light to be seen. Hardly expecting an answer to the problem, I looked aft through the open bulkhead door, and I had the impression of a light farther aft in the submarine. A reflection, I thought—some outside light—and perhaps the gun-tower hatch is open, though it shouldn't be, and I would have noticed it if it had been. In any case, I stepped over the sill of the watertight door and moved aft in the dark through my old home.

And there *was* a light burning! I could have sworn it was in the wardroom, or at the after end of the control room—yes, I saw it, a single bulb in the wardroom passage, a bulb in a metal cage on what we called a 'wandering lead'. Opposite the galley, with my left

foot raised to the sill of another bulkhead door, I saw much more. I looked into that wardroom where I'd lived and fed and been bored and afraid and happy, and under the streaked light of that caged globe I saw Peter Tregarth. He was sitting hunched on the after-bunk, and on the table in front of him stood a bottle and a glass. He'd heard me coming: he stared, without seeing anything, into the darkness where I'd stopped, and he called:

"Who's there?"

I was too much surprised to answer: I only stood and looked at his face under that harsh white light.

He half rose, between the bunk and the table, and he shouted: "What d'you want? Who is it?"

As I stepped over the sill into the light, I noticed that the bottle was half empty and that there was no water on the table. I tried not to look as surprised as I felt as I moved into the barren yet familiar wardroom and held out my hand to him.

"Peter. They told me up top that you were around somewhere. But I'd given up looking for you—came to see my old ship instead——"

He stared at me as if he thought he were dreaming, or as if I didn't really stand there, and in that second I saw more than astonishment in his eyes. I saw the deepest unhappiness that I have ever seen, or ever hope to: I saw astonishment as a brief camouflage to despair.

"Jimmy——"

His tone was flat. I had an impression that he was doubting, trying to convince himself that it was really I that stood there facing him, and not some wild fantasy out of whatever strain it was that had brought him to this wretchedness of the lonely and their bottles.



"Only one glass, Peter? No allowance for a guest?"

He heard me suddenly, but after I had spoken: he seemed to wake up, and he even smiled before he answered: "I wasn't expecting guests. . . . But there's a thing here, here, somewhere. . . ." He began to grope in the locker under what had been the Captain's bunk—Hallet's bunk. With his head out of sight below the edge of the table he said: "Used it for water earlier on, but it's such a damned ugly-looking thing I chucked it in here. Oh, this——" He came up again, showed me the chipped enamel mug. It wasn't very pretty. "This do you, Jimmy?"

And before I could even nod, he reached across the table and grabbed me by the shoulder. He stood a head taller than I did.

"Drink?"

He'd finished shaking that shoulder; he reckoned I was real. I could see that he was glad to have me there, but I could see, too, that he'd lost the habit of friendship. It was something he was fighting to remember. This wasn't an easy moment. I offered him a cigarette, and his hand shook so hard, while he groped in my case that I had to stop myself deliberately from taking one out and handing it to him. Then he got hold of the cigarette, dropped it on the table, retrieved it with exaggerated care and I lit it for him before I lit my own. I wondered how he managed to get by as normal, in daylight, with these sessions in between.

"I'm not drunk, Jimmy." He leant sideways against the curved steel wall of the hull and he challenged my opinion. "I'm not drunk."

I laughed.

"Last time I saw you drunk was in Maxim's—

remember? That Aussie two-striper who said that R.N. midshipmen shouldn't be allowed in grown-up bars? You asked him what the hell he meant, and he said: 'All right, kid, put this down your little R.N. hatch, and if you can hold it I'll drink a bucket of beer without taking a breath.' The thing he gave you had a filthy purple colour and Max called it a depth-charge, but you drank it, and you had to fight it on the way down."

Even now I could see Peter swallowing it and not looking at it, like medicine, staring at the door, wanting to get out into the dark so he could lose the poison: but the Aussie's sneer kept the drink in him, and after he'd turned white as the wall and not been able to speak for ten or twelve minutes, slowly the colour came back and he said to Max, who was watching and hadn't much liked it: "Get that bucket. Bring this gentleman his bucket so he can feel at home."

I remembered that, and other incidents, and looking at this new Tregarth—well, the change wasn't happy. We'd been seventeen, eighteen, in those old days, and if there was one of us that the others had looked up to, looked to for support and decision, that one had been Tregarth. Now—he sloshed whisky into the enamel mug and pushed it towards me.

He said: "Long time ago, all that. Cheers." He wasn't drunk—no; but he was on the way. He nodded at his neat whisky several times before he drank it, and when he put the glass down on the table he said again: "Cheers."

I sipped my own: rankly, I like a little water in my Scotch, and anyway I'd been drinking gin.

Tregarth asked me, quickly: "Jimmy. You won't mention—you won't——?"

"Of course not. Look, I've come down to meet old friends, and you're the first that I've found. Oh, I saw young Ferris—he told me he'd served with you for a bit. But no others of our lot. I——"

"Ferris." Peter nodded at the table. "Nice bloke, Ferris. Good First Lieutenant, too. Doing well with this Reserve lot, I hear. . . ."

"You didn't get on."

He didn't seem surprised at my knowing it. Only vaguely disappointed.

"No. So they've all told you, eh?"

"Nothing of the sort. I only saw Ferris, and I gathered from his manner that you and he——"

"Uh." Peter emptied his glass and gave himself more. He said: "Man can't stop it, can he? Thing drifts. Way it goes it blasted well goes. Chap changes, eh? Listen."

I listened. All there was to hear was the slap and rustle of the flooding tide, a faint creak from the ropes fore-and-aft and the scrape of wires between this submarine and her neighbours. Familiar music.

"Well?"

"Just like a lot of filthy whispering. After a time you get to understand, and then it's worse." Tregarth smiled into his Scotch. He said, suddenly loud: "Bloody muttering!" and I thought: This fellow ought to be in hospital, not commanding a ship. Even if he's normal the rest of the time, there's too much wrong. I wondered if I could help: we'd known each other well, we'd been friends long enough ago for none of the more recent past, whatever form it had taken, to come between us now.

I asked him: "Peter—what's eating you?" I tried to

adapt myself to fit into the pattern of his thoughts. "For Christ's sake, give me another drink and stop talking to yourself. What's all this about? What's the nonsense I don't know?"

And he told me. Before, as I'd always known him, he would never have voiced anything that touched him personally. He'd never admit worry, trouble, fear. And now that I know the story, I see that shell, that hardness, as the thing that broke him. You know—the one reed that bends and survives, the other that can't or won't, and breaks. Peter had never learnt to bend to a wind, and so when he met a gale that was stronger than he was—well, that was it.

He told me his story in the way that a little boy confesses, painfully, part inarticulately, to his father. The account was garbled, disconnected, rambling. Sometimes I lost track of his thoughts, but most of the gaps I can fill in because I had been there at the time that it had all happened, and while he spoke only a few words, they were enough to throw a whole picture on to the screen of my memory. And here, pieced together as well as I can manage it, is what he told me between midnight and dawn in that darkened shell of a submarine. All the time the back of my hearing was held by the tide's quiet voice: it was as though the sea had her ear to the creek in which we lay, as though she listened while he spoke. And with his first words I was back again, like into an old dream that I'd forgotten; there was a bugle pumping alarm into the cruiser's loudspeakers, there was tracer rolling slowly up across the soft night sky, the crash of guns, and the cruiser astern of us falling back with her bridge flaming like a huge red torch. Then suddenly I had it in my glasses on

their mounting, a second bomber coming in at Green four-five, and pressing the switch across so that the director tower could line their pointers on my own. I shouted into the voice-piece on my headset, "ADO's sight target! Torpedo bomber green four-five closing, ADO's sight target!" But even as I went through the drill—the only thing I could do, even as I pressed the switch and shouted—I knew that it was too damn late.

## Chapter 2

THE Eastern Mediterranean Fleet lay moored in the wide harbour of Alexandria. Not much of a fleet—four cruisers, and a mixed flotilla of destroyers. But it looked more, because out in the middle, with their bows pointing perhaps wishfully at the breakwater, were the French cruisers and the battleship, and close into Gabbari there was a hulk disguised as a battleship and referred to as the *Duke of York*. That hulk took a lot of the Junkers' bombs when they came throbbing over in the evenings from the south. The Germans used to fly inland over undefended coastline and line up on the Delta and make their attack on the way out seawards. So far the Fleet hadn't suffered much from their visits because the balloons kept them high, and when they came over the harbour they had to fly through a concentrated umbrella barrage from the ships' guns and from batteries ashore. There was a duty midshipman with two seaman boys of the duty watch stationed each night on the flat white roof of the British Girls' School: they had a field telephone with them, and when they heard the throb of the German engines they passed the word to the flagship to stand by. It was a more reliable warning system than radar. The only ones that never got warned were the British girls, and that, from what we heard, was a valuable education for the midshipmen and the seaman boys.

One night a bomb got Mary's house, of all places, and

a number of distinguished and promising officers were posted as killed in action. As good a way as any. And the same night we felled a plane with the pom-poms and the pilot baled out, but by the time we landed a party on the coaling jetty to bring him in, he was dead. He was dead from the bare feet of a ring of Egyptians who'd ringed him and kicked him all the time we were coming. The dockyard men always went barefooted, and their feet were probably as hard as a marine's boots. A couple of months later those same Egyptians and their brothers heard our Army was backing reluctantly closer to the frontier: they saw us getting ready to evacuate, and they made it plain that they were all set to give the Germans a big welcome. The Germans wouldn't know about the pilot who'd been kicked to death. Whoever were on the spot with their pay-packets, they were the masters of the fellahin. The King of Alexandria was a fellow called Baksheesh: the urchins yelled his name as they followed sailors through the streets, they held their hands out and they screamed for cash. Then they took some of it home, and their mothers and fathers sent them out for more. They ran alongside the sailors, yelling:

"You want my sister? You want zig-a-zig?"—and the gharri-drivers tore through them, using their whips and shouting what sounded like "O-Aricleck! O-Alaminack!" We were told that it meant: Mind your left buttock. Mind your right. You had to mind everything in Alexandria, but mostly you had to remember to keep a hand on your wallet. The rich ones came out around four in the afternoon; they sat in the cafés sipping thick chocolate and gulloping sweet, sticky cakes, and they were so damn fat that to see them was enough to wrinkle

your nose. 'They weren't any different from the ones in tatters begging in a different way outside in the unswept street. Only the ones inside had cash, and they weren't letting it dwindle. Outside in the street the kids sold leather coshes and dirty photographs and offered their female relations for next-to-nothing and for anything you might want them for, and inside, the fat matrons sat with their slim, dusky daughters and wondered how far they could raise the 'ante' with some neutral diplomat or a pasha who was eighty but liked them young so they could do all the work and not tire too fast.

The sailors shook off their attendant crowd of beggars at the entrance to the Fleet Club; they crowded the bar and they livened the anæmic Stella beer with gut-rot-gin. They were sick of Tombola and Egypt and Stukas and women that were either too expensive or too downright dirty—they were sick of it all, so they got pretty well tight, and while someone bashed out the local national ditty on a half-dead piano, they put their arms around each others' shoulders and sang bawdy rhymes.

. . . . .

The wind hadn't changed in three weeks. It was out of the west with a touch of north, and during the middle-watch it had come up hard out of the west, bringing the first sand. Now the cruiser's decks were yellow-covered: it lay dusty-yellow over the turrets and in ridges along the barrels of the six-inch guns. The sand came down the hatches and in through the screen doors and skylights: it seeped in through open ports and settled in the salad. There wasn't a thing that didn't hold sand. Not a plate of food, not an eye or a mouth that wasn't gritty. There was only one good thing about it, and that was that it seemed to have beaten the flies. This was



October, late in the month, but the flies were still biting. Flies are bad enough in civilised countries, where they carry dirt, but not stings and poison as well: in Egypt that particular plague never heard the order to stop when its seven-year run was out. And from the local populace they had every encouragement to settle.

The sand came like a cloud out of the desert where the soldiers were fighting and losing and falling back. They didn't have the supplies and the weapons that came with Monty, and there was nothing they could do but go backwards. At that, they were doing it slowly, and they were fighting all the way; but still the battle was coming nearer and the sand came ahead to remind seamen that there are worse things than salt water. And at this moment it was too deep water that the Fleet was looking: at last there was a move coming. Boats to and fro with Staff Officers and navigators with charts, Commanding Officers with cheerfully serious looks and Gunnery Officers suddenly overtaken by reality. A move—and in His Majesty's ship *Pelorus* even the marines looked as though they liked the idea.

Shells and charges for the six-inch guns were coming over in a steady stream from lighters on the cruiser's starboard side. A gunner, warrant officer, stood checking lists and numbers, while a large part of the ship's company manhandled the projectiles over the side and on to the gunnery branch, who fed them into the magazines. There was a lot of noise. 'Guns' himself—Lieutenant-Commander Steele—stood staring at a pile of cordite charges. His cap sat square on his head, flat-topped with a cane inside it—no floppy cap this, a gunnery cap. His eyes were bright, like the eyes of a small bird, and his sharp little nose was the beak.

When he spoke, his voice was high and sharp. "Mr McAlpine!"

The Warrant Officer slewed his head round, focused a pair of reddish eyes upon his departmental chief.

"Sir!"

But the way McAlpine said it wasn't subservient. It was a voice from somewhere north of the Border, and any respect for a Southerner was only a matter of King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions. Besides, he was busy.

"Mr McAlpine. Where's the four-inch? Eh?"

McAlpine looked down at his list. There were several pages of it, clipped to a piece of three-ply. He ticked at a figure with his stub of pencil, then advanced to the ship's side, where the guard-rail had been lowered in-board. He glared malevolently downwards at a small dockyard civilian in the empty lighter.

"Well? Are ye getting the hell out of the bloody light, or are ye thinking of having a picnic alongside?"

Lieutenant-Commander Steele coughed, loudly. McAlpine glanced round at him, and saluted.

As though he'd heard no earlier question, the Gunner reported: "Goin' well, sir. Goin' well."

He turned back towards the ship's side, but Steele caught him with his thin, high voice.

"No four-inch yet?"

McAlpine turned wearily, mouthing for a form of expression which would carry none of his exasperation.

"It's below, sir. Below, in its racks, I hope—unless it's got itself to the cuddy, sir; and you can never tell, with Tomkins, unless you're there to watch him. Perhaps you'd like to check for yourself, sir."

Both McAlpine and Steele knew that Tomkins was

the soundest man they had in the whole of their department. Even to Steele it was plain that his interference wasn't welcome.

McAlpine forced a smile into his craggy face. "Don't ye worry, sir; we'll be ready." He waved a hand at three crammed lighters which lay waiting for space alongside. "Only this little lot to come." His feelings got the better of him, suddenly. "Then when it's in and we're two-bloody-blocks I dare say we'll ha' to land the whole flipping outfit again the morrow and dock to have our bloody bottom scraped instead." McAlpine noticed a strained look on the Gunnery Officer's face: he managed a happy look again, and added, "Don't ye worry, sir. We'll be ready."

Midshipman Peter Tregarth picked his way aft down the starboard side, avoiding the stream of shells, passing behind McAlpine and Steele. Yes, he thought, that'll be it. They'll get us all ready to go, then they'll cancel the operation, whatever it is, and we'll be swinging round this damned buoy for another month studying navigation and flashing stupid messages to and fro as if we were a lot of Boy Scouts. You'd think that in war-time there'd be something better to do, but so far it's only a floating classroom—Tregarth had never liked classrooms. Anyway, he thought, this is all too good to be true. Even if we do go to sea, we won't meet anything more stirring than rough weather.

Farther aft, just for'ard of the torpedo tubes, Lieutenant-Commander Flack, the *Pelorus's* First Lieutenant, was supervising the hoisting-in of the cruiser's second motor-boat. Flack was a tall, thin stick of a man with a bald head and an earnest, quiet manner. The sailors called him Stringbag. Now Tregarth saw him standing

close to the ship's side with one arm flung out in a sort of Nazi salute to the crane-driver: he peered down into the boat which lay alongside, watching anxiously while its crew secured the chain sling of the hoist. Flack's lips moved over his rather prominent front teeth, and Tregarth could just make out what he was muttering. Certainly none of the men in the boat could possibly have heard: Flack was expressing his interest and concern only to himself.

"That's it—smartly, now!—now the other one. Ah!" He saw that they were ready, and he raised his voice to call down to the boat's Cox'n: "Are you ready, Johnson?"

The Cox'n, whose name was Elliot, grinned and touched his cap.

"Aye, sir! Pull 'er up!"

Flack nodded, and turned his head to look at the impassive crane-driver. He nodded several times more, and flipped the raised hand up and down.

"Take up the slack!"

The wire came in slowly until the sling on the boat was taut.

Flack called down to the Cox'n: "All right, Johnson?"

"Right, sir."

Flack's right arm thrashed the air.

"Hoist!"

The boat swung up, airborne and dripping: it dripped all over the First Lieutenant as it passed over his head. The crane-driver had done it before, often enough; he didn't need to watch the tall man's frantic signals. He settled the boat neatly into its chocks on the raised gun-deck.

Flack removed his cap, pulled a large blue hand-

kerchief out of the pocket of his shorts, and mopped the top of his head. Tregarth heard his muttered "Phew!", and the long, slow steps came scrunching over the sandy deck behind him as he headed aft. He quickened his steps, hoping not to be noticed.

"Tregarth!"

The midshipman stopped, turned, and saluted in a brief, undisciplined manner. He was thinking: Why in hell did I stay in range? Flack smiled, showing his teeth, big and yellow, as though they'd be more at home in front of a cart.

"Tregarth. Tell me—you snotties always hear first—where are we going, umh?"

"Lot of theories about, sir. Messman says a landing in Crete, but my hammock boy tells me we're going to bombard Tobruk. I'd say it looked like another Malta run, sir. What do you think?"

"Ah. Malta, eh?" Flack pulled at the peak of his cap so that it settled down over his eyes. He pushed it part of the way back again, and nodded. "You mean a convoy of some sort? Yes, that's quite on the cards, I dare say. Quite a possibility, Malta, eh? You'll go far Tregarth—far, I'm sure. Don't let me keep you from your studies."

Tregarth saluted, resumed his progress to the quarter-deck. Hell! he thought. No wonder the man's been passed over for any sort of promotion. Even in the Navy you could hardly promote an obvious lunatic. What happened *after* promotion was possibly beyond their Lordships' control. Tregarth saluted the quarterdeck as he stepped across the narrow brass strip which marked its for'ard limit, and he approached the Midshipman-of-the-Watch.

"Hello, Peter; just in time. On the dot."

Ignore it. Qther people's mannerisms, openings, jokes. Usually it's a waste of time to ask for any reasonable explanation, so ignore jt and make your own point. Tregarth jerked his head in the direction of the Officer-of-the-Watch.

He asked: "I suppose we can take it he'll leave us alone for long enough to get some lunch? Hardly been inboard the whole blasted forenoon. Didn't even get a decent breakfast. I'm hungry, and I can't keep my crew happy when they're bloody-well starving. You might remind him, if he thinks of calling us away in the next half-hour?"

The other midshipman laughed.

"Lunch? Boat-runners aren't entitled to food, Peter. Certainly not when we're preparing for sea. Listen——"

The timing couldn't have been more perfect: a click from the loudspeakers, a gentle humming, the shrill pipe and the Quartermaster's loud, beery voice.

"Aw-aay launch's crew!"

The hum continued until the switch clicked again and shut it off. The Quartermaster came out of his lobby at the for'ard end of the quarterdeck, and, rounding X turret, he came face-to-face with Tregarth. The Quartermaster tried to smother his grin, not very successfully.

"Sorry, sir. Says to me, 'is nibs does: 'Call away the flippin' launch,' 'e says, and I calls it away, like you 'eard. I'm only the bird in the gilded cage, you might say. Missed yer tot, sir?"

Tregarth looked at him.

"I don't get a tot. And today I don't get any bloody lunch either, apparently."

"Don't know what the Navy's coming to, sir. But it can't be no worse than I've 'ad the flippin' honour of experiencin' for the last eleven deadly years, sir."

"Eleven?"

Tregarth didn't want to seem abrupt, disinterested, to cut the conversation short. But he felt he ought to be heading for his boat.

"Eleven, sir. Year's time the Admiral'll say to me: 'Bennet,' 'e'll say, ' 'ow about signing on for another bash, old cock?' An' know what I'll tell 'im?"

Tregarth was edging for'ard.

"No. What'll you tell him?"

"Well, sir, I'll give it my consideration. Same as old 'Gaiety' does—beg your pardon, sir, same as what the Commander does—every time I come up as request-man. 'I'll give it my flippin' consideration,' 'e says, and that's the last I ever 'ears."

Tregarth ran for'ard towards the boom where his launch lay moored. *Getting ready* for sea, he thought: wish to God we could only get there. He glanced over past the French cruisers, saw the laced lop of the sea's swell appearing now and then like the flick of a white handkerchief over the long curve of the breakwater. Out there the air looked clean, something fit to breath, while here it was full not only of sand but also of half the smells of Egypt. You can tell where you are by the smell, he thought; you can check your position by the stink. Here it was joss-sticks and gharri horses and rotting vegetables, and the local idea of hygiene was to chuck a bucket of rose-water over the top of it. In Haifa the atmosphere was mostly wet, uncured hides; Port Said had a more distinctive blend of Turkish delight, fish meal, bad liquor and open drains. Here,

now, you could smell the desert in the wind—the sand was right in your nostrils—but even against the wind and the sand Alexandria's dockyard area put up a powerful resistance.

The crew were down there waiting for him in the open launch. Obviously they'd been ready to slip without him, to come round to the gangway, as they'd have to if he didn't turn up. But it was a disgrace for a midshipman to join his boat at the gangway, and as the boat's crew liked him, they'd waited till the last possible minute. Tregarth ducked under the top wire of the guard-rail, grasped the lower wire while his feet found the steel rungs in the ship's side and he climbed down then without having to look on to the boom's flat top. This was one of the links with the old Navy, the days when men climbed rigging and did the job of steeple-jacks half a dozen times a day. A seventeen-year-old midshipman joined a ship now, and because it was expected of him, and he'd look silly if he couldn't do it, he ran out over a boom so easily that it might have been the way he'd been used to climb into his pram. Tregarth thought: It oughtn't to have a flat top: it makes it too easy for us. The jackstay ran lightly through his fingers as he sidled running over the boom and dropped down on to the Jacob's ladder. He remembered that the first time he'd met one of these things had been his first day as a boat-runner. It was a Sunday, and he'd been bringing his boat up to the boom in a hurry just before Divisions. He was wearing his new superfine uniform suit; he hadn't worn it before. He yelled, "Make fast for'ard!" and ran for the ladder with a fear in him of missing his Division before it was inspected.



(Now, with six months' service behind him, he'd have jumped at an excuse to miss it. In those days, with Dartmouth fresh and fearful in his mind, the thought of being late for anything was a nightmare.) So he ran for the ladder, and he had no idea, until he was up and climbing on to the boom, that the ladder had been painted only that morning. By the time he knew it, his new uniform suit was striped heavily and broadly with glossy white paint. So, after all the eagerness, he missed Divisions; but his suit was saved, because the elderly marine who looked after the midshipmen's wash-place and hadn't been ashore in the ship's two-year commission, taught him how to take paint out of superfine cloth by rubbing it with older superfine. Tregarth was thinking of that as he slithered off the ladder and dropped into the launch's bow. As he stepped quickly aft over the widespread thwarts, he told the bowman over his shoulder:

"Let go!" The boat drifted stern-first from the boom, he took over the brass wheel from the Cox'n and put her half ahead. "Sorry, Cox'n. Seems we've had our dinner."

The Cox'n shrugged his broad shoulders.

"'Ad me tot, sir. That's better nor nothing."

Tregarth swung the boat around, down the cruiser's port side and a wide sweep astern before the approach to the gangway. He stopped her dead six inches clear of the lower platform, left the wheel with a nod to the Cox'n while the bowman and the sternsheet-man dropped their boat-hooks accurately on the boat-rope and the gangway bracket. He ran up the gangway and saluted the Officer-of-the-Watch.

"Launch alongside, sir."

He thought: And no bloody lunch, either.

The young Lieutenant returned his salute.

"You're to take the Navigating Officer to the flagship, then on to Number Six, land the Captain's servant and bring off messmen. All right?"

Tregarth had seen Able Seaman West, the Captain's elderly shadow, stumping importantly down the gangway. All shore leave had been stopped: West was conscious of the value of his mission. He had an envelope to deliver to the bank—to the bank's manager, in person.

The Officer-of-the-Watch told Tregarth: "Navigator's coming. Wait in the boat."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Most of this boat-running job was waiting. He saluted again, and went down to wait behind the brass wheel. West was telling the Cox'n that in *his* day, when *he* was Cox'n of a boat, why, they'd call a boat away, and before the sound of the pipe had died at all that boat'd be smack alongside the bleeding gangway. Not keep a man waiting on the quarterdeck like he was queueing for a bus in bleeding Southsea.

"Them days," added West—"them days things were run proper. *Sailors*, we was then."

The Cox'n laughed.

"Bare feet an' pigtails, eh, Westy? Spittin' tobacco all over the flippin' issue, and a lot o' tarts comin' off from Spithead for a swing in y' 'ammock, eh?"

The Cox'n spat over the side. "Ask me, lot o' bloody 'orrors, *you* were."

The cruiser's navigator, Lieutenant Peabody, appeared suddenly at the top of the gangway. Under his left arm he carried a roll of charts, and in the hand of

the same arm he gripped a heavy brown envelope. Peabody scuttled down the oak steps and dropped into the sternsheets. From the top platform of the gangway the Officer-of-the-Watch shouted:

“Carry on, launch!”

Tregarth told his bowman and sternsheet-man: “Let go!”

He turned the boat in her own length and set course for the buoy astern of the cruiser which carried the Admiral’s flag. *Pelorus’s* Navigator, Peabody, sat down on the after thwart and fiddled with his charts.

Tregarth, like most men in *Pelorus*, liked Peabody. This was a straightforward, easy man: he treated sailors with the respect they deserved as individuals, midshipmen with amused tolerance, junior officers as equals and senior officers as they came. He was the best navigator in the Fleet, and that surprised nobody, because his earlier experience had been in the Merchant Navy, where the art of accurate navigation is treated as a matter of seamanship and not as some separate science. (The Mercantile Marine were lucky in that the education of their junior officers was not complicated by gunnery, torpedoes, radar, anti-submarine work, Admiralty Instructions.) The Merchant Navy had produced this fellow Peabody, and in His Majesty’s cruiser *Pelorus* he was probably the only man, apart from the Captain, who commanded universal respect.

Tregarth eyed the rolled charts. They were rolled tightly together and the end of the tube was towards him: he tried hard to see into the tube, to gain some clue as to the area of operations in which the Fleet was shortly to be engaged. But nothing was visible that could assist him in his researches.

He shifted the launch's bow slightly to port, and he asked the Navigator: "Sir. We going to Malta?"

Peabody turned and studied the youngster's too-disinterested face. The question had been put so casually, and the Navigator knew that there was nothing casual about it really. The gunroom wanted to know, and Tregarth, who for some reason was determined to lead the gunroom, wanted the answer. Well, they'd have to wait—the little tikes 'd have to wait until the ship was at sea before they heard their answer.

"Malta? I hope not. Probably only an exercise. Why Malta?"

"Why not, sir?" The boy's eyes were on the flagship's stern; he was judging the right moment for the start of his turn: had to be right, when it was the flagship. "Those extra stores can't be for us. And we've loaded a lot of small-calibre ammo, apart from point-five and pom-pom. What would we want Bofors shells for, sir? It is Malta, isn't it?" He slowed the launch to half speed, swung the wheel hard. "We couldn't eat all that corned beef, sir, either."

The Navigator grinned. "I've no idea, Tregarth. You may be right."

Tregarth yelled: "Bow!"

The bowman brought his boat-hook chest-high, horizontal: then he shoved it out and its brass hook dropped neatly over the flagship's boat-rope. The engine raced astern, taking all the way off the boat, and Lieutenant Peabody stepped quickly on to the gangway. He turned, acknowledged the midshipman's salute.

"Nicely, Tregarth."

Tregarth called to the bowman: "Let go!"

He thought, as the bow of the launch sheered out

There's a lot of Scotch and Gordon's came aboard as well. An awful lot of it. Even *our* wardroom couldn't use that much, not in a month of Sundays. It's Malta, all right—needn't have asked the pilot at all: it can't be anything but Malta.

His senses told him something was wrong, before he really saw it: for six months he'd been running boats, and the laws were in him.

"West! Arms off the gun'll!"

Able Seaman West stared in amazement. His elbows stayed where they rested on the boat's side: he sat there with his mouth open, goggling at the midshipman. Tregarth stared back at him. This was a rule of safety—arms on or over the gun'll could be caught and crushed when a boat ran alongside or bumped. West had done fifteen years in the Service, he knew it all, but he was the Captain's servant, an influential and respected member of the ship's lower-deck aristocracy: he didn't expect to be pulled up by a Snotty, by a kid younger than his own son. West didn't move his arms, and the launch's Cox'n moved in. He didn't want his midshipman to repeat the order and have it ignored again. That would make things serious. This midshipman and this Cox'n brought off three boatloads of sailors from shore to ship each night, and often some of the men were drunk enough to make trouble. It was in their interests, chiefly, that the Cox'n tried to take the brunt of it. It saved them from serious charges in the morning. A man had a right to get tight, so long as he could manage himself when his leave was up, so long as he was sailor enough to hold his liquor. One of the laws in boats was 'No Smoking'. Sometimes the liberty-men insisted on lighting cigarettes: sometimes they were full of liquor,

and when the Snotty sent his Cox'n for'ard to tell them to put their cigarettes over the side, they ignored the order and told the Cox'n what they thought of his interference and the manner of his birth. Well, one way was to take the boat alongside and turn in the defaulters on a charge. But that wasn't a reasonable or a traditional way. What Tregarth had been taught was that when he landed his liberty-men on the gangway they shouldn't be a nuisance to the ship, and so when he had trouble in his boat he'd stop engines and let her lie there in the middle of the dark harbour until the trouble died. It was never long before the bulk of the men, anxious to get to their hammocks, shut the others up. One way or another . . .

The Cox'n looked down at West. He wasn't an individual, he had no other name at this moment than Cox'n.

He asked West: "You 'card the order, ch?"

West stared up, surprised, at the young Leading Seaman. He thought: Can't make a row of it—not if the flipping killick backs that little bastard up.

He slid his elbows off the gun'll as if he'd never owned them anyway, and he asked the Cox'n:

"Order?"

The Cox'n turned away. Tregarth spun his wheel, turning the heavy launch into the basin which fronted Number Six Gate. Number Six *Gate*—not Number Six. Number Six was a brothel. Close to port as they came in lay Farouk's yacht, delicate, fine-lined and proud in the bow, but that pride was a fixed expression which the ship showed to outside eyes like a mask, a defence: to the midshipman she was nothing else but a well-born whore. She'd been a present to Farouk's father from

Victoria of England: now she lay there, a ship disgraced, manned and possessed by rot, so much fine old silver tarnished in a pawnbroker's window. Her heart had been broken, and a man who had a feeling for ships could tell. Tregarth thought: She's been shamed often enough for her sensitive face to show it. Close to starboard along the other mole, broadside to the landing jetty, lay a Polish submarine whose crew had mutinied earlier in the week. Tregarth had been sent over with a party of marines from *Pelorus* in his launch, and the mutiny had come to a sudden end. Something political had caused it, something about the Russians and Poland's future. That wasn't the Fleet's concern, or the marines'.

The launch swung gently in to the steps where three messmen waited impatiently with their crates of vegetables, sacks, boxes. Tregarth thought to himself: Let's get it over with, let's get to sea! This whole place stinks; it's rot and vice, and on five bob a day I can't enjoy the vice. The messmen came grumbling aboard with their stores, the launch's crew handling the heavy stuff for them. A crate of melons broke open on the jetty; three or four of the fruit rolled into the sea, and an argument started between the bowman and the ward-room messman.

Tregarth shouted: "All right, pack it up! Hodgson—get aboard! Jenner——" The row subsided, still sizzling, and no doubt it would be remembered and remain a small feud for many weary months. Tregarth breathed out hard against the clinging stench. "Let go for'ard! Shove off!"

As they headed slowly out from the basin, a powerboat from the flagship came swinging in, and Tregarth

had to come round hard-a-starboard, close to the right-hand jetty, because the flagship's boat was way over to port, more than in midstream, badly handled: her bow-wave rose and swept high across the entrance, and as she passed the launch Tregarth had to port his wheel again to meet the wash bow-first, in case the rolling should dislodge the crates piled high between the midship thwarts. Tregarth glared at the Petty Officer behind the other boat's wheel, but he couldn't say anything because there was a commander in the sternsheets, and the commander was glaring at *him*. “

Tregarth saw his Cox'n standing with bunched fists, his tanned face deepening to an angry red: he saw the Cox'n open his mouth, and he snapped: “Cox'n!”

“Sir?”

“Flagship. Commander. They don't know any better, Cox'n.” The danger had passed.

The Cox'n muttered: “Stupid sod. 'Ow d'you reckon that 'orror qualified for P.O., sir? Flippin' Correspondence Course?”

“Looked like it, didn't it?” Tregarth turned his boat out of the narrow entrance, and swung her round to leave the end of Arsenal Mole close to starboard. He told the Cox'n, happily: “Lunch. I'm bloody-well starving—don't know about you.”

The Cox'n spat neatly over the side, watched closely, as though it was a fascination to see the white blob caught on a crest and carried swiftly out to lie in the bubbles astern on the wake's edge.

“Reckon we've 'ad our dinner, sir. Ten to one it'll be another bloody trip soon as we get alongside. Ten to one.”

Tregarth accepted the bet: “I'll take you.”



"Tanners, sir?"

"Can't afford it. That's a day's pay."

"Fags?"

"Right. Ten to one in fags."

The Cox'n nodded, and looked sideways at the midshipman.

"Got 'em on you, sir?"

"No. Inboard. Don't worry, Cox'n, you'll lose."

The sun was yellow overhead, with the sand under it filling the hot sky, and the sea beyond the breakwater was lazy, slow and heavy. Tregarth studied its edge at the horizon, looking for the crinkles which would show any real movement farther out. But there weren't any: the line of the world was straight, clean-edged; the only fuss was along the breakwater, where the swell boomed now and then with a sound like far-off guns. Where the sea couldn't reach the stone, it was yellow with its coat of sand, but the lighthouse at Ras-el-Tin stood high and clean, as though it had something to be proud about. Perhaps its stones lived in the past; perhaps they were satisfied with that and never looked down; perhaps they were too wise to peep over the palace walls.

The stores were out of the launch and into the cruiser. To a chorus of muttered profanity the boxes and sacks had been dragged and carried up the gangway to the quarterdeck, whence a party of seamen, detailed according to the day's orders, were now removing them to the messes for which they were intended. In this country a messman had to learn all the dodges before he could buy stores. Melons, for instance—if a melon bore one small, tell-tale mark, like a bruise the size of a thumb-print, a wise man would leave it alone. That mark would be

where a farmer had pumped it up with swamp-water to make it bigger and worth a few more piastres in the market. The swamp-water carried every disease from Gippy tummy to typhoid, so it was more than just a waste of money to buy a melon with the little brown birthmark. And cheroots—there'd been a vogue in the gunroom for them, and, because they were cheaper, particularly for the bent sort which were sold twisted together in threes. The *Pelorus's* midshipmen had always bought them from the messman and smoked them happily because they were (appropriately) dirt-cheap and, to the young untrained palates, a taste of luxury on five bob a day. But one afternoon Tregarth was in the Arab market where the messman got them, and he saw that twisted sort lying out on flat trays on the open stall. An Arab customer fingered around among them—he was quite obviously an expert, a connoisseur—and when he came across one that caught his fancy he'd raise it to his old wet lips and give it a good hard suck. If the cheroot didn't draw properly, the old man 'd drop it back into the tray while he tried another. Finally he'd selected two that suited him and after ten minutes' formal haggling over the price he bought them. Presently a new customer was going through the same routine, fingering and sucking and leaving the duds for the *Pelorus's* gunroom. The day after he'd seen it, Tregarth waited until the evening's cheroots were glowing stubs before he told the story. Now cheroots were out, and the midshipmen sucked pipes instead.

The launch was empty except for its crew, and every one of them had his eyes on the head of the gangway, waiting for the Officer-of-the-Watch or his midshipman

or the Quartermaster to appear like some four-hour God and tell them to secure to the boom. All of them were *hungry*, short-tempered—*hungry*. They'd seen boats being hoisted in, boats which could have been doing some of these extra trips—they watched the head of the gangway and waited impatiently for authority to secure their boat and come inboard.

The Cox'n said: "They forgotten us, sir. 'Adn't you better report?"

Tregarth nodded. He stepped on to the lower grating and climbed the steps, remembering to run the last few when he was in view from the deck. He saluted the quarterdeck and the Officer-of-the-Watch all at once, two birds with one stone.

"Launch, sir. Crew've had no lunch. Permission to secure?"

"No. Sorry, Tregarth. We're just about busted for bloody boats. You're to go in to Gabarri and pick up an Army officer and two Army sergeants. Carry on."

Tregarth stood and looked at him. He thought: Hell! why is a boat's crew expected to do without food when quarterdeck staff drip like blazes if their reliefs are ten minutes late? He said, with an obvious reservation: "Aye, aye, sir."

### *Chapter 3*

TREGARTH's salute in its rigid perfection was a protest on its own. He clattered slowly down the gangway, letting his face break the news slowly to the launch's crew. Climbing into the boat, he resented the Cox'n's half-smile.<sup>4</sup> Seeing the resentment, the Cox'n smiled more broadly. (This was what he'd learned to expect: as he frequently told younger members of the ship's company, he hadn't joined the Navy yesterday.)

"Reckon you owe me, sir. Eh?" (It wasn't the ten cigarettes that made him happy—it was being pushed around, missing a meal or two; it was what he was used to. In any modern idea of a service, bedside lamps and every consideration, the Cox'n would have lost interest. This was part of what he considered to be a proper life, and half its value was being given something to complain about later on over his tot when he didn't give a damn anyway.) He asked the midshipman, happy to see the youngster discomfited over such a trifle: "You got them fags inboard, sir?"

"Of course. Glad someone gets something out of this." Tregarth raised his voice. "Let go, shove off for'ard!"

But it wasn't a joke any longer. When a man worked hard from dawn on he needed a midday meal, particularly if he was only part of the way to being a man. And being hungry wouldn't matter if everyone else in the ship was hungry too—but it wasn't that way: it was just this boat's crew missing their lunch. On the quarter-

deck, Tregarth told himself, it's easy to laugh it off. "Short of boats—can't be helped." Can't be helped, the hell! Of course it could be helped. He shaped a course for the Gabarri jetty, and, thinking of his errand, he wondered for a moment why *Pelorus* should be embarking Army men. Then: Who gives a damn why? He caught himself up, thought: All right, I'm hungry; it shouldn't change the whole picture—what *was* this? He remembered, traced the source of it—it was there in his pocket: an airmail letter from his mother. It had come that morning, and it wasn't a happy letter. None of her letters was happy now. I ought to know better, he thought; I ought to learn—or rather have learnt—that detachment is the only sure approach to fulfilment.

Words sounded in his ears—words from this and other letters, words in his mother's voice. In his mother's voice they had a separate meaning, a whole invisible context, although now in his mind they stood on their own. 'Desertion'—that was the word that brought the shame of it, the retreat, withdrawal; and it was his father's back that he saw growing smaller in the distance towards Gabarri's grey fly-blown outline, and in his mind he was watching side by side with his mother under the noise of that word 'desertion' like some word of contempt, a court-martial, the word treachery unspoken, but not far off. More personal than that: in himself there was a feeling of the desertion, of a back turned *on him*. Whatever the cause of it, whatever the root of the abscess which had been there as far back as his memory held, whatever it was and unpleasant as its effects had always been, this had been a matter not referred to him; and while he'd been only too sharply aware from the age of three onwards that his father and

his mother disliked each other and moved on separate, divergent tracks, he had never imagined that one or the other would turn and run.

The flagship's stern fell away to starboard in the corner of his eye. He saw the closed boom across the harbour's entrance, gun batteries flanking it and the duty destroyer anchored just inside. Other destroyers were secured alongside the fleet oiler, over there inshore between Gabarri and the entrance. All day, the destroyers had been shuffling in pairs from their buoys to the tanker and back again, with full bellies to their berths, while the next in the queue slid across the harbour like so many pups to their mother's teats. All of them, and the oiler too, bore that yellowish tinge of sand.

„ The Cox'n broke into his thoughts.

“Gabarri, sir?”

Tregarth nodded.

“Have to bring off some Pongos, Cox'n.”

The Cox'n whistled sharply, his natural expression of interest or surprise.

“Pongos, sir?”

Tregarth saw the man's thoughts rushing out as rumours to the mess-decks. Troops, a landing. Embarking troops. It smelt of Crete, and that smelt of the bomb in the mess-decks and pools oil-covered, black—pools that looked like oil, but when you trod in them they turned red because the oil was only a surface to the blood. It had taken three weeks to clean the smell of dead soldiers out of that ship. Embarking troops?

“Uh. God knows what for.” He didn't like to break the spell of the Cox'n's dream. But he had to. “One officer and two N.C.O.s. God knows what for.”

What for? What's any of it for? Well, lunch or no lunch (and this hurt in the stomach felt like no lunch)—this was peace. No bombs or guns had the power to break it; one war could be compared to another, and this one rated as peace. Weapons were nothing, unless they came as letters in that neatly formed woman's hand: *then* they had the power for damage, they came like hooks dragging you back into that lonely birthday battle which had never ended: it had opened on the day when bastards were first born and bitches started breeding, and if Tregarth had believed in God—which, under his parental circumstances, was a thing that could hardly have been expected of him—he might have wondered who, if not God, had set the process in motion.

Gabarri jetty lay ahead of them, a long grey finger pointing into the harbour where a few feluccas waited hopefully for passengers that they wouldn't get because all leave had been stopped. Close to the jetty was the graving dock, a trawler's masts and funnels showing surprisingly out of the stonework, and at its side half a dozen official cars were parked on the road's wide dirt verge. The cars' owners were in Admiralty House, which stood back from the far side of the road and from this distance looked like a dirty cube of sugar under its Admiral's flag. At this end of the jetty, the point of it, Tregarth could see the waiting khaki figures and a pile of what was, presumably, their kit.

Peter Tregarth, on the other side of that shabby little wardroom table, paused in his rambling, disjointed story. So far I'd learnt nothing new yet—well, you'll understand later, and this is supposed to be *his* story, not

mine—this talking of the soldiers who came with us on that convoy to Malta was not at all comfortable listening for me. If it wasn't a necessary part of what he had to say, I'd have rather he left it out. It was connected too personally with a matter of which I had never spoken, a matter of great shame to me, and the cause of my greatest loss. You could say that it was the real reason for my having left the Navy. Oh, I know I've given an impression that this was just a *choice* of mine, a quietly considered course of action—and so it was. But behind it was something more sudden: the force and growing influence of my own vividly remembered action working in my mind awake and asleep—did I ever really sleep, in that year?—until I was, at the height of it, close to a breakdown. That is a thing of the past—or it was. I'd killed it like a man kills a snake in the garden or a doctor kills a germ in the wound: I am not, whatever else you may say in the end, a weak man. But before I finished it, before I strengthened myself to face it—out-face it—I lost my wife, Mary-Ann. I would rather have lost my own life: I say that not sanctimoniously, nor easily or emotionally, like some neurotic in the temporary release of alcohol, but as a fact. I have had time enough to think, and the value of *this* and *that*, the values of all things that have been close to me, are quite clear. I am not trying to present myself as one worthy of praise or respect: I am only telling you that at my lowest ebb the loss of my wife was the greatest loss I could have suffered, and when I tell you that I would rather have died, I am telling you, in God's sight and hearing, what I believe to be true.

Now I had sat down with Peter here in my old ship in the hope that my being here might be of use: that by



listening to his story and straightening, here and there, a twist of it, I could do some good. In that spirit I had listened to him, putting myself back into the picture of his memory, which was also my memory, seeing it all clearly as he spoke of it. But now, unexpectedly, we drew close to a matter which had been for me a private battle over many years, a battle I had fought alone and won, an issue I had dealt with, dismissed and buried. I had finished with it, put it out of my mind, but when his words approached it they came like the thrusts of a sharp spade over an unmarked grave.

I had sat down thinking to myself: I've had enough to drink; I'll let him think I'm drinking with him, but he can have it all. Suddenly I was deadly cold, soberer than any judge, because I was at the same time judge and under judgement. I wanted a drink of that whisky.

"Peter. Don't want to interrupt, but this mug of mine's been empty for some time."

It wouldn't have been difficult *not* to drink. He'd filled his own glass twice since he'd started talking, and he hadn't even looked at my chipped enamel mug.

"Sorry." He pushed the bottle an inch across the table towards me, using the back of his hand. "Help yourself." He asked me: "Want water?"

"No."

I didn't want water. I had a question of my own.

"Do those soldiers matter?"

"Eh?" He was pouring his own drink. "How d'you mean, soldiers matter?"

"The Army men we took aboard that day—the ones you brought off in your boat." I made myself speak of them as if, to me, they *didn't* matter. "Are they necessarily part of your—of what affects the story?"

Peter smiled into his whisky, and nodded. It wasn't an easy smile. He nodded again.

"I'll tell you . . ."

A few months earlier I wouldn't have stood it. I'd have found an excuse, some way out: I'd have allowed myself the fact that I hadn't come here to be damaged by words, to suffer from a drunken reminiscence what I'd already suffered once in fact and afterwards a thousand times in memory and—well, I'd been through it enough and come out of it, and why should I have to stand being reminded of the whole shame of it just because I'd found my old ship and in it a drunk whose worries, it seemed, ran parallel with my own? Was this my hurt or his? Could his be worse than mine, and because he hadn't been able to outface his own, should I be recalled to mine? I tell you, a year or two ago I'd have thought out an excuse, and left him to his own fight. But then, a year or two ago I'd had behind me the softness of Mary-Ann. I'd never known real unhappiness, because by the time the memory was real enough to hit me I had her to balance it: I had not learnt then, as I have since, that unpleasant things are only to be avoided by facing them and beating them in the open, by deliberately breathing their stink into your lungs and letting it seep out of your nostrils. No smell that a man has to spend his life with can be avoided by a simple holding of the nose. I sipped my whisky, and Peter said again:

"I'll tell you——"

In that moment I hated him for his ignorance. I could hear in his voice and see from his face that he was thinking: This hurts like hell; I don't talk of it for fun, but since you ask for the answer, I'll give it to you.

That was his feeling behind the "I'll tell you", and he didn't know that I had to hold myself down and drug myself with his whisky to stand it. He didn't know that in the first place I'd only sat down to listen to him because I wanted to help *him*, that the only way now to help *myself* would be to get up and out to some other place where I could lean against a bar that I didn't know and talk to strangers who had nothing to do with any of it. Somehow, the bar was essential, perhaps because I was already half tight, and perhaps because the effect of Tregarth's story was enough to drive me towards that stupid temporary oblivion. Hadn't I passed that stage?

"All right, Peter. You said before you'd tell me. All right, tell me."

He slopped whisky into his glass, filling it to the top. He raised it to his lips, and when he put the glass back on the table—all one continuous movement, up and tilt and down—the glass was a third empty. What was left in it glowed like a hard cylinder of pale gold on the dark table-top under that single, brilliant bulb in its wire cage. He saw me looking at his glass and he smiled.

"It's all right, Jimmy. There's another bottle."

From the launch they could see the soldiers plainly now, one standing slightly apart from the other two, and behind them a shapeless pile of baggage. Peter disliked the baggage as soon as he saw it: out of politeness to the Army he'd have to order some of his crew to load it into the boat, and such orders were never welcomed by boats' crews. (*Baggage parties were what did that sort of job—and if you wanted a baggage party, what were the bloody*

*duty hands doing except eating the boats' crews' dinner? Next thing, we'll be 'grooming someone's bloody horses, picking flippin' lettuce out of the flippin' Delta—anything but running a bleeding boat.*) Peter thought: And no lunch in them, either. Just as well we're going to sea. Hoping that they really *were* going, he moved one hand from the brass rail in an intention of touching wood, but he stopped it because he remembered that in his experience that act of superstition had always worked the wrong way. When, over the table in the dining-room, his mother and father had been happy, laughing, talking together, he'd sometimes put his hands together under the table and thought: Let it last; please God let it be this way and stay and never change: then he'd bring one hand out secretly and lay it in the open on the table's edge, *Touch wood.* The scene had never lasted, after that; the wood had never helped. He put his hand back on the wheel, called for slow speed and swung his boat sharply so as to turn her completely round with her starboard quarter alongside the steps and her bow pointing out into the harbour.

He yelled to the stoker: "Stop!" The launch's stern came round, swinging fast; he reversed the wheel and shouted, "Half astern!"

That was it. It was perfect, not a sign of a bump, and right to an inch where they ought to be. With the Army looking down at them from the jetty, it *had* to be right: no difference if the onlooker was a private soldier or General Alexander, it was still the Army, and under its eye there could be no error from the Navy. Anyway, this time there'd been no error.

Peter Tregarth had been concentrating on the right moment for his turn, for the correct amount of wheel

and the exact moment for each order to the stoker who controlled the boat's engine. He'd had no time to look at the silent watchers on the jetty. Now he signalled briefly to the stoker to stop engines, and he looked up at his waiting passengers: as his eyes rose over the jetty's stonework to the tall khaki figures, his right hand was already flicking up from his side to salute their officer. He was thinking: *That* much for your bloody Aldershot Tattoo. His fingers touched the peak of his cap and he was looking straight into his father's eyes.

Major Simon Tregarth brought his hand up slowly to return the midshipman's salute. But his surprise couldn't stop his smile, or his opening: "Peter——!"

Peter looked down into the boat, and his hand came down too. He called to the bowman: "Get a line ashore!" and to the sternsheet-man he said: "Make fast."

He thought: Please, God, make me wrong; make it a fever or a dream or something. Perhaps I've been thinking too much about the whole thing. If You like, I'll even touch wood—or isn't that anything to do with You? I've never worried about it. He glanced up again, and it was still his father standing there, white and strained, as if someone had just hit him in the face. Peter looked down again, told the bowman and the sternsheet-man: "Get their kit aboard."

The words of that earlier letter came to him; he saw the way the ink marked the paper: *Some little slut he picked up*, and farther down the page: *He never cared at all for me or for you, only for what he wanted. Perhaps it's as well it's happened now and not later.* Peter heard the sternsheet-man mutter, "I lumps me own bag an' 'ammock. Them pongos flippin' well paralysed?"

Peter turned on him quickly, savagely: "Feltham—that's enough! Get ashore and bring their stuff aboard."

Feltham gaped—this wasn't usual behaviour from the kid. But all the same, he moved quickly for the steps.

Tregarth shouted to the bowman: "Hodgson! Get back in the boat!"

The Cox'n, puzzled, asked him: "Sir?"

The midshipman told him: "Feltham can handle it on his own."

The bowman came back down the steps, a surprised look on his wide, farmer's face. The Cox'n's surprise was still evident, too.

Peter told the bowman: "Go for'ard. Feltham's enough."

He made himself look up again, and he told his father: "Launch for you, sir, from *Pelorus*. Would your men come aboard, please?"

Simon Tregarth looked down at his son, and nodded. His first reaction to the boy's denial of him had been one of shock, almost horror: now it came out of him in a cold, hard anger which showed only in his eyes. He'd learnt to control his anger, over the last twenty years—learnt to control it so completely that his emotions had found a new, more sudden and quite uncontrollable outlet: only his eyes gave him away now. He looked down at his son's pale, impersonal eyes, and the only plain urge in him was to take the child over his knee and give him a hiding in return for his insolence. But here, in the immediate circumstances, he could hardly do that.

He told his sergeants: "Go ahead."

They and Feltham dragged the kit down the steps and into the boat's sternsheets. Feltham's face was scarlet: he was careful not to look at the midshipman who'd

made him look and feel a fool in front of another Service. Peter, knowing it, thought: Too bad—you let *me* down, or started to, with your one-man display of indiscipline. All the same, he wished it hadn't happened: one thing of this sort led to another. He promised himself that he'd talk privately to Feltham later on, have it out and be done with it.

The Cox'n told him: "Messenger, sir; looks like. From Nut House."

A sailor from Admiralty House was running down the jetty towards them, waving his arms. He shouted something as he ran. The baggage was all in the boat.

Peter asked his father: "Will you come aboard, sir?"

Their eyes met briefly over the invitation, cold and awkward, neither giving way to the other, two pairs of pale eyes startlingly alike in their coldness. Major Tre-garth nodded, and climbed down into the boat.

The sailor from Admiralty House skidded to a halt on the jetty's edge, and called down to the midshipman: "Message from Officer of-the-Watch *Pelorus*, sir: call at the flagship for navigating officer. They phoned through, sir."

"Thank you." Lunch was a little farther away again—who could tell how long they'd be kept waiting at the flagship's gangway? "Shove off, for'ard! Let go, aft!"

Feltham had secured his line to the jetty—he *couldn't* let go: by now he should have had the sense to cast it off, he should have been holding on with his boat-hook, or at any rate the end of the line looped around the bollard so he could just let it go when the time came. The Admiralty House messenger bent and took the hitch off the bollard, dropped the rope's length carefully into the sternsheets so that it wouldn't fall in the

sea on the way. Wet lines messed a boat up—a sailor aimed to keep them dry. Feltham, red in the face again, coiled the rope down aft. One thing led to another. . . .

A destroyer was slipping from the oiler, and Peter kept his boat well over to starboard, so that when the destroyer sheered astern he wouldn't be in her way: he made a wide circle in his approach to the flagship's stern. He noticed that the destroyers which had already fuelled and were back at their buoys were secured only with slip-ropes: the heavier chain cables had been unshackled when they'd left for the tanker, and now the cables held their anchors at the hawse-pipes, while only a steel wire rope ran from each destroyer's bow through the ring of the buoy and back to a slip on the fo'c'sle. The destroyers were ready for sea: only one slam of a hammer at that slip and each would be free of her buoy. Peter saw a wisp of steam from a capstan, a flicker of smoke now and then from a funnel, a signalman on one destroyer's bridge taking the canvas cover off a signal lamp. With a leap of real excitement in his heart, he thought: There really is a move! He looked over at his own ship, *Pelorus*, and he saw men working on her fo'c'sle. Thank God, he thought, we're going too. There had to be *something* to live for. This was it.

"Slow!" The stoker shoved his throttle forward, and the engine's rumble fell to a jerky murmur. "Stop!" He shouted to Hodgson "Bow!" and Hodgson was ready there with his boat-hook: the launch lost way, gliding in to the flagship's stern.

Tregarth had learnt his lesson—when he'd started running a boat, and felt an early (as it turned out unjustified) confidence in his ability as a cox'n, he'd



brought his launch in to *Pelorus's* gangway one morning with a burst of speed: the speed upset his calculations, and as he slammed against the gangway his own wash caught him and flung the boat round at the ship's side. The Commander, who was never an easy man to deal with, had been on deck at the time, and with his hands on the rail he'd stared down at Tregarth for a full two minutes of sheer agony before he'd let everyone within earshot know what he thought of midshipmen in general, and of Tregarth in particular. So Tregarth had learnt that speed was a thing to be avoided when there was a gangway, or a Commander, close to hand. Now he centred his wheel.

"Slow astern!"

Peabody was waiting on the quarterdeck: he came briskly down the gangway, acknowledged the midshipman's salute as he stepped over the side and into the boat. He saluted Major Tregarth, and over his shoulder he said to Peter:

"Carry on, please. He held out his hand to the Major. "My name's Peabody. From *Pelorus*. Heard some of you chaps were joining us."

Peter shouted: "Shove off, for'ard! Slow ahead. . . . Half!"

Simon Tregarth shook the navigator's hand.

"How d'you do. My name's Tregarth."

The navigator looked startled.

"Really?" He jerked his head, indicating the midshipman. "Any relation to *this* Tregarth?"

Peter, from his raised platform, was concentrating on getting his boat away from the flagship, but he glanced briefly, politely down at the men who stood looking at him from the sternsheets. His father hadn't answered

the question: only stood there with his eyebrows raised—to Peabody they asked: What d'you mean, relation? and to Peter: Well, *are* we? Peter supplied the answer, making it firm and unchangeable.

“No, sir. None at all.”

## Chapter 4

I DON'T know quite how to put this, even if I can explain it at all. I only remember clearly that I was sitting on that narrow, hard-cushioned bench facing Tregarth across the submarine's wardroom table, and that the yellow glow of his whisky gave him a third eye lower down against the dark-stained woodwork barely lit by that lonely bulb: I'd just spilt my own whisky, knocked the mug over for no reason except that I'd forgotten it was there and, in the moment that he'd mentioned his father, jerked my hand back and sent the mug skidding on its side across the table. He hadn't noticed (he hadn't noticed even that his story had become more than even *my* story; he'd no idea that his father's being that soldier was a nightmare in itself); he hadn't seen the spilt whisky, and he never heard my confused apology. I told myself that I was drunk, that all of this was nothing more than a dreadful hallucination rising with the liquor that I wasn't used to drinking in such quantities: then (because I'd had time to teach myself the truth and face it) I thought: No, Jesus, this is true; I'm here and awake, and although I've had a few drinks too many, I'm not drunk at all, and *this is real!* It's real, Jesus, as real as Your pain was. As real as Mary-Ann—and that's a real pain, closer to me than Yours. Was my crime foul enough to deserve such depths and lengths of punishment? Didn't her going and my suffering that caused it seem enough to You?

Wasn't her loss the end of it? . . . Often, seeking a sham comfort, I had told myself, Man would understand, condone, perhaps even a court of law would see sufficient provocation, circumstance: now I wondered, Has God less forgiveness than Man? Did He make Man, or was it the other way round? Then, fearing more hurt, I'd pray to Him, beg Him to ignore the words my mind had used against Him only a moment ago: but I could never pray for long—revolt which was fear always rose to browbeat prayer, and I'd ask Him in my heart, Did You ever read the New Testament, hear the words Your Son used—do You still revel in revenge?

. . . Forgive me. I started, a minute ago, to describe my feelings as I faced Peter Tregarth and his unexpected story. The attempt has failed: thinking of it drove me back into myself, into the past and its nightmare: forgive me. There's another thing: over the years that have passed, this has been something within myself, a close and private horror which warped and twisted me and nearly drove me mad. It lost me my wife. There was, it seemed then, no limit and no answer, no antidote or anodyne. Only her loss, a new and more immediate shock, somehow broke the crisis. Please understand, I am trying to describe calmly a state of mind which was by no means calm and which I see now I have not the ability to describe: if I fail, it is simply that my personal vocabulary is unequal to so great a spending of emotion. Any man who has experienced such a thing will bear me out: it is a power of feeling defying both verbal description and detailed image in the mind: it is so overwhelming at its height that when it is gone the memory is only the roar of a train ap-

proaching and the sight of its approaching power and the rails here, close, the rails which would receive a living body and care nothing after the passing of the train. It is a thing that a man must live with for years before he can force out of himself the strength to face its climax, break or be broken. And now I was thinking: My confidence was unjustified. I should have known that the earlier battle was only a preliminary skirmish, that the real issue was undecided, and that what I had seen in myself as strength was only in fact a sort of bluff. . . .

*Sorry.* After the years of holding it in to myself, it seems like the breaking down of a solid door to get it out. Now I'll do it quickly, without thinking about it. I'll tell it out loud, and afterwards you can go. Don't bother to say Good-night—just go, and if you prefer it, we won't know each other again. Only I have to tell you.

. . . . .

I don't think that I could have survived if it hadn't been for that dying gesture of the ship, her assertion of her own individuality for the last few moments of her life. I'd climbed down the ladders from the bridge and past the signal platform to the upper deck, where the screen door opened forward of the fore'sle ladder: I was dazed, deaf, but the earlier fear had gone. Not from any sort of courage, because I had no responsibilities now that we'd had the order to abandon ship, and before I'd been scared stiff. Now I wasn't even seasick. I was just dazed, and—well, hundreds of times I'd come off watch on the bridge and climbed down those ladders on to the iron deck and turned aft, and now, dazed, habit turned me aft instead of jumping or diving

into the dark swell of the sea. I remember fighting my way aft past and through the wreckage round the four-inch guns, but at the top of the ladder into the waist I was stopped by a rush of men coming for'ard. There was a lot of shouting, but I couldn't hear any single word over the noise of that and of the sea, and the pom-poms were still firing in long and short bursts—God knows what *at*. We were finished now; the only present enemy was the sea. I tried to get down the ladder, but it was hopeless, seething with men going for'ard, some silent and some swearing and some just noising. You could hear them only when the pom-pom paused, and even then it was the sea's voice that held the power. You could hear the noise of the flames, too—the roar of burning paintwork and the hiss where the sea touched it. I tried to by-pass the ladder, to climb down the outside of it, using its side rail to hang on to, but there were men coming up all round it, and I had to wait for a space, like a car has to wait before it can turn into a main road. I stood there feeling the heat of the blaze on my face, and someone grabbed my shoulder. I turned quickly, and looked up at Lieutenant-Commander Flack, the First Lieutenant.

He shouted in my ear, bending down to me: "For'ard! You're going the wrong way, lad! Over the starboard fo'c'sle rail, boy!"

Flack left me, and I saw him drop on to his knees close to the after four-inch. The flames must have risen then—I saw that he was yelling to something that looked like the top half of one of those figures they dress up awkwardly in shop windows. It was leaning against the torn and twisted shield of the gun-mounting, and in the light of the flames I saw that it was the top half of a

sailor. Flack was shouting into the man's ear. I saw him put one of his long, thin arms around the gunner's shoulders, and over all the other noise I heard him scream into Flack's face.

Flack shouted into the ear: "Easy, lad, easy!"

By the flames' light, I recognised that distorted face. It was Tregarth's Cox'n, Wells. He hit Flack full in the mouth. He didn't have any legs, but he had the rest of his body still, and he used his left fist on Flack.

I heard his shout: "Over the side, y' silly old bastard! Look after y'self!"

I never saw Wells, or Flack, again, nor to my knowledge did anyone else. There was a gap in the stream coming up from aft, and as I dropped on to the ladder down into the waist I left them fighting, Flack trying to get half a man over the rail, and the other yelling and striking at him, telling him to save himself and to leave others in peace: even in the shallow, uncertain light of the fire I'd seen the dark blood that coated them both. I hurried aft, and in that moment *Pelorus* asserted herself and saved me from what would otherwise have been a natural conclusion to my stupidity. The stern had gone, five minutes before; she was down that way and flooding fast through the huge break, but now suddenly, for no reason that any Damage Control Officer could possibly have foreseen or assessed, she began to move the other way. Her broken after-end began to rise, slowly at first, then with gathering momentum as the water inside her crashed for'ard, like thunder breaking bulkheads under our feet, and as her bow thrust down into the heaving sea I heard the screams from for'ard, where men who had sensibly sought the high and free side were caught and buried in the unexpected dive which

put them in the power and suck of the ship's dive. A wall of water flung up by her fast-rising stern rushed at me, higher than X turret and twice its weight: I saw it coming, started to climb the rail, then I was in it, and I remember not being able to breathe, and the salt like acid choking my lungs and a thought: This is bigger than me, and I suppose I asked for it when I was thirteen. There was a wire or something like it in my left hand, but the wire was jerked away and my hand burned (I found afterwards that all the flesh of its palm had gone with the wire); then I was underwater, turning over—I suppose because I was giddy and had no sense of control; only now I wanted to live—I didn't give a damn about anything except being alive: surprisingly there was air and not water. I breathed, but in that first breath began to vomit, and the air was gone before I'd finished; all salt water again and the weight of it; nothing I could do: but again, suddenly, air!—I breathed it; I saw her mainmast strangely small but clear against the stars, and instead of liking that, I wanted to be rid of her. Then it was dark again and the sea put me up hard against what felt like the barrels of the point-fives: I'm almost sure it was then that my ribs were broken. I was moving fast down the crest of a wave towards the dark bulk of her funnel—the waves seemed to be rising almost as though it was *their* victory, as though *they* had done it all and were rising, leaping to snatch every life they could out of the ship's carcase. I saw it coming—that silly, upright, serious funnel, now not upright, but at forty-five degrees. I saw clearly that I was rushing at it: I couldn't argue with this sea.

I remember thinking in that moment of utter help-



lessness, when I was no more to the sea's strength than any piece of flung wreckage, that when<sup>\*</sup>I hit the funnel it'd be the end of me. I don't know whether it was that I had no time to feel sorry for myself, or that the sensation of being quite unable to influence or resist the physical powers that were moving me somehow, almost pleasantly, removed the necessity for care. Thinking back on it, I have wondered whether the calm insouciance of some men condemned to violent death and on the brink of the very plunge itself is ever, really, bravery: whether it is not that same detachment, a knowledge of the futility of further effort against the inevitable; a natural detachment from the act of dying, as natural as in other circumstances another man will clutch a straw. I suppose that resignation can be called bravery, but I feel myself that it is largely a matter of circumstance, and that a man who can be brave at one moment can be a coward on another similar occasion. With me, now, there was certainly no question of bravery: it was simply that no action of mine could have changed any detail of the picture. I was moving so fast on the wave's crest, and the funnel was a vast, solid mass waiting for me over the high breaking tops of other waves: there was nothing else in the world except me and that funnel and the sea which had us both in mind. . . .

But it only knocked me out. Perhaps my wave broke and the backwash of it slowed me down—I don't know. All I do know is that one moment I was being flung at that funnel like a rat being chucked against a wall, and the next well, I was vomiting, there was a pain in my head and another in my stomach where I lay doubled over the round edge of a Carley float; there were men's

bodies under me on the float, and I was being sick over them, and they didn't seem to care. Through my sickness I thought: Perhaps they're all dead—but someone, one of them, must have been live enough to drag me up over the edge. I started being sick again, and when it ended I got my hands up on to someone's shoulders and forced myself up and into the float. The effort hurt my side badly: I didn't know then that I had three ribs broken.

I began to grope around under the tangle of bodies to find the paddles which should have been lashed inside the float. None of them moved, or showed any sign of life: I wondered, were we all washed on to this thing? It didn't seem possible. I groped with my hands in the wet darkness for a paddle, and my side gave me hell, but suddenly I found one and dragged it out, and as I got the thing clear, one of the bodies close to me came to life.

It sat up and asked me, easily, as though this was an experience which came to all of us every second Tuesday: "What y' doing, mate?"

I told him that I had been getting a paddle out from the deck of the float. I held on with my left hand to one of the strops on the outer edge, and I held the short paddle up for him to see.

He asked me: "Wha' for, mate?"

I thought: This fellow's in a dream. For that matter, none of it seemed real even to me. It had never seriously occurred to me that this could happen to us, and now that it *had* happened, it was as though we had passed from the ordinary matter-of-fact world into some silly fantasy which was dangerous on the face of it, but was still unreal and couldn't last. And yet in it, in all the

discomfort and danger of it, there was a peculiar sensation of *release*. I remembered a troopship which we'd been escorting and which had been sunk by a torpedo from a submarine, and the survivors as they were brought aboard emptied their pockets on to the deck, even the paper money out of their wallets; they scattered it around as they came inboard as though they had some feeling that now they were free of the need for money it didn't matter any longer and, more than that, they wanted to be rid of it. Well, this was just as unreal, and I had the same feeling of *escape*—which sounds ridiculous—and now I can't explain, except perhaps that it was a reaction from the very effort of escape when I'd known that the ship was finished and that to survive was certainly no more than a fifty-fifty chance.

We were huddled together (a dozen or more of us, I suppose, and, so far as I knew, all but I and this one other might be dead or dying) on a sort of outsize pig's bladder with a grating deck under it—that's all it was, except that it had the Admiralty's blessing and was probably as good as any other small craft in a rough sea like this one—we were being flung from wave to wave, like something in a Pelota game. Now and then a wave broke right over us, green and heavy, dropping in a heap that turned white and ebbed away over the sides and down through the grating like melting ice-cream: for all I could tell, we were alone in this sea, only us on our little float, and the width of the Mediterranean, around us. Yet I knew that close by there must be hundreds more survivors from the ship. Perhaps they'd got themselves well clear before she went down: certainly I must have been one of the last to get away.

“Wha's y' paddle for, mate?”

I told him: "To paddle with." As I shouted the words I realised that it was I that was the idiot, not him. In the first place, what paddling could I do, from this cumbersome, oblong float in waves this size? And secondly, where did I intend to paddle *to*? I added: "Weather may ease when it's light."

I still felt a fool.

He yelled in my ear: "Won't be no call to, mate. Destroyers'll be looking for us, see?"

I didn't agree with him: the destroyers still had the job to do—there was still a convoy to get to Malta: *we* weren't all that important. Before I could answer, another wave dropped smack on top of us: it knocked me sideways towards the float's edge, and panicking at the idea of being washed over the side, I grabbed frantically for a hand-hold. The man grabbed my arm, pulled my hand off whatever it was that I'd seized.

"Easy, mate! That's Lofty, there: easy!"

"Lofty?"

The immediate danger had passed. I felt sick again—sick and incredibly weak. The sea had heaved us up, and now we were slithering down again into another trough, waves' crests high above us all around against the sky.

"Lofty's me mate. I got 'im into this float, see? And 'e's got a floggin' great slit in the back of 'is 'ead. No call to go catchin' 'old of 'im, mate."

I apologised: "Sorry. I didn't know he was hurt."

"Ah, 'e'll get over it. Seen Lofty take some nasty knocks, I 'ave. Never scuppered 'im yet—not Lofty. Take more'n that, it would. Only easy, see?"

I promised to be careful of Lofty. It seemed to me that he'd be more comfortable if we could straighten

him out a bit—he was all tangled up, with his arms twisted under him. I suggested it to my friend, and he agreed. "Together we eased Lofty's body over and straightened his legs: it took a long time, because we had to match our movements with the waves'. We got Lofty into the straight, along the edge of the float, and the other man settled down with his arm pillowing his friend's head.

I heard him telling Lofty: "Easy, chum, easy! . . . Floggin' good breakfas' we'll 'ave, in one o' them destroyers, see? Come daylight it'll be eggs an' bacon an' kye, mate, mark my words—eggs and bacon and a floggin' great cuppo', eh? That's what'll set you right, mate——"

I wondered if he knew that Lofty was dead. I wondered if he was trying to fool himself, or if he wasn't sure of it one way or the other, and just trying and hoping for the best, ignoring what looked probable and was fact. He never stopped talking for longer than the fall or wash of a wave, then 'd spit salt water and start again, like a mother's worried patter, soothing: the soft, familiar nonsense patter that a mother gives to her sick baby's comfort. Only Lofty wasn't any baby, and he wasn't sick: he was a dead sailor.

"Tell y' what, mate—you can 'ave me tot! Not just sippers nor gulpers, mate: the 'ole ruddy issue! T'morrer in the destroyer, see?"

Suddenly he shouted, a yell of alarm and fury, and I saw the head and shoulders of a man out of the sea and over the side of our float, head and shoulders at the side, and the arms dragging at Lofty's legs, dragging them over the side in his effort to get aboard: grabbing at anything—only it happened to be Lofty. I'd had

charge of the legs, and I had to hang on as hard as I could to keep them from going over the side.

The sailor flung himself across his friend's body; he wrenched the hands away and yelled like a madman: "Let 'im be! Let 'im be, y' bastard, y' murdering swine! Take yer 'ands off me mate!"

The new-comer's arms jerked, grabbing at nothing: his head vanished below the float's rim, but it rose again, and I leant across to get an arm around his shoulders, but as I stretched out to him, his right arm swept sideways and hit me hard in the face, knocking me back off-balance and for a moment stunned: I tried again, but the float's edge dipped to the sea and a rising wave flung her up again hard, so that I was thrown back: the wave brought him up on to the edge of the float, and again I moved forward to help him, to get him aboard over Lofty and into the float. He had a knee sideways on the float's edge then, and it slipped over hard enough for me to hear its impact on Lofty's face: his hands were on the other sailor's throat. . . .

I make no excuse now. Call it madness, anything you like. All I remember is blind rage. A moment ago, remember, I'd tried to help the man aboard: now—the paddle was still in my left hand, I saw the knee in Lofty's face and I heard the other man's choked yell as that frantic hand gripped him by the throat and began to pull him towards the side: I held the paddle in both hands, up over my head, and I brought it down with all the strength I had left. . . . It hit the stranger edge-ways, a hard, ringing blow that jarred all up my arms, and somehow the pain carried sharply to my side, sharply so that I dropped the paddle and held my ribs and for a moment forgot everything except that stroke

of pain under my heart. When I looked up I wanted to disbelieve my own action—the sudden hurt had brought me to sanity, I suppose, and what I remembered doing only a second ago was like some dreadful action in a dream. I looked for a denial of it, but all that I saw was an arm falling away from the float's side, and in that second when I realised that I had killed him, or given him to the sea—which came to the same thing—the destroyer's searchlight caught us and I saw that the sleeve was sodden khaki, I saw the white face float back and down, and I knew the face, even though I didn't know its name. I'd heard the Navigator call him Major, and the Captain, once, I'd heard addressing him as 'Soldier' . . . I didn't know his name, but I knew that I'd killed him. The searchlight was still on us, and the sailor was shouting into Lofty's ear.

"They found us, mate! Like I told y' they would; they found us!"

They'd found us. I wasn't until a long time afterwards that I began to wish they hadn't.

Perhaps now you'll understand. . . . During the hours and days that followed, I don't remember feeling anything except, now and then, a sort of surprise at being alive. In my mind I don't think there was anything much; certainly not the sense of guilt which began to settle into me later, and—after the war's excitement and my own preoccupation with it had gone, and left a hole to be filled in my thoughts—took possession of me. It was a long time coming, and its force when it burst was the worse for the depth and strength of its roots.

And that was only as it *had* been. Now (in its old state, as I think I told you, I had finished with it) it

was suddenly alive again, and I felt the fear and guilt contracting the muscles of my stomach. The man I'd killed wasn't just a nameless soldier. I knew his rank and his christian name and his surname. The man I'd killed was Major Simon Tregarth. I'd killed the father, and now I faced the son across a table and a bottle. That was all that stood between us, so far as he could see or know—a table and a bottle, one mug and one glass. We were friends, old shipmates: I faced this friend whom I'd only sat down with to help, comfort, and all I could think was: I killed your father, Peter. That was why I asked you if you had to talk about the soldiers, why I didn't want to hear about them. I never even dreamt he was your father, I never once heard his name. But I killed him with a paddle that I pulled out of its lashings in the bottom of that Carley float. (Starting again, I told myself—over and over and starting again: Like it used to be! For Christ's sake, think of something else—the overdraft or next year's crops or a sick cow: put *this* out of your mind!)

I thought: If I told Peter, had it over and done with, 'wouldn't that be an end to it? One way or another, wouldn't it be better to let it out—could there be a better place or time, a better man to tell it to? . . . But I couldn't. That's an odd thing: then, when I spent that night and morning with Tregarth and his bottle, only a few months ago—then there was no question of this being anything but my secret. At that time, if I'd thought that Peter or anyone else might have had some knowledge of it, I think I'd have got home as quickly as I could and staged a shooting accident. I had thought of it before, more than once. I'd be out over the rough gorsed hillside for a rabbit or two, and—well, there'd be



an accident. Tragedy, and a funeral in the village church; fine upstanding young farmer, progressive, splendid war record . . . that'd be the way of it. But there was, fortunately, no possibility of my story being known to anyone but me. And yet—this is the odd thing—here and now I've been setting it down on paper, for all the world to see.

## Chapter 5

LOUDSPEAKERS clicked into a live hum all over the cruiser; there was a pause of nothing but the electrical humming, and then, in the distance beyond the loudspeakers, the Quartermaster's cough and the wet preparation of his lips as he raised the bosun's call. The thin pipe shrilled out of the loudspeakers into every corner of the ship.

"Special sea duty men close up! 'Ands to their stations for leaving 'arbour!"

o At four o'clock in the afternoon the Fleet had been ordered to thirty minutes' notice for sea, and at five the destroyers had slipped quietly from their buoys, swung themselves around and steamed slowly, lazily (as if they didn't mean anything by it, as if they were only stretching their legs and would be back soon, nothing to get excited about), in line ahead out of harbour. Their signal letters flapped gently in the sanded breeze, as though they were telling the harbour and the sharp-eyed Egyptian audience: Only an exercise; it's only us—why not look the other way? Already, with some of the destroyers away and nosing up the swept channel and the others on the move, the harbour looked half empty.

Tregarth hurried forward to his station on the fo'c'sle. Flack was there, doubled over the guard-rail and peering intently at the buoy, as though he was frightened that it might get lost. They'd already passed a slip-rope; its eye was there on the fo'c'sle, held by the Blake

slip and ready for a swing of the blacksmith's hammer to set it free.

Tregarth reported to Flack, who corkscrewed his length off the rail and asked, peevishly: "Where've you been, Tregarth? You could have learnt a great deal up here, a great deal—could have *taught* you something. Eh?"

"I've been hoisting-in my boat, sir." He couldn't stop himself adding: "Haven't even had lunch yet."

Flack nodded, smiled as though the answer pleased him.

"Good—excellent! . . . Now—you see what we're about?"

Tregarth could see what the cable party were about, even if the value of Flack's assistance was less obvious. They were heaving in the chain cable so that its end could be shackled on to the inboard end of the anchor shackle. The foc's'le Petty Officer raised his hand, and the cable-holder stopped—they had the links lapped and the pin of the joining-shackle in, and the blacksmith was hammering a lead pellet into the aperture behind the pin to hold it in: he tapped the broad side of the joining-shackle lightly with his hammer, and the loose edges of lead fell away. He nodded, the P.O. waved a hand, and again the cable-holder purred, hauling in the cable and taking the anchor's weight off the slip. The Petty Officer kicked the slip off with a backward swing of his heel, and a sailor bent and dragged it aside, out of the way. And now Flack joined in again. He leant out over the rail above the hawse-pipe and twirled one hand in the air behind him as he watched the flukes rising slowly along the ship's side.

His hand stopped twirling, he held it up straight and

still and shouted in his high, clear voice: "Handsomely! handsomely!"

The P.O. stifled a smile, signalled briefly with one finger, and the cable-holder slowed to a crawl, easing the anchor into its bed.

"'Vast heaving!' Flack leapt upright, both arms raised. But they'd already stopped, although the man at the cable-holder repeated mechanically, out of discipline: "'Vast heaving, sir."

Flack asked Tregarth, staring at him keenly, cunningly: "Now, Tregarth—what do we do *now*?"

Tregarth pointed at the cable and at the other slip, the one with the screw. He told Flack, politely: "On bottlescrew."

It was happening already, without the order from Flack: the slip was on the cable, and an Able Seaman had an iron spike in the holes of its barrel, tightening it from its full length so that it brought the anchor up hard in the hawse, all taut and the weight on the screw.

Flack asked Tregarth: "And the cable-holder?"

Tregarth had been thinking about his father. He asked Flack: "Sir?"

"How do we leave the cable-holder?" Tregarth thought: The cable-holder: to hell with the whole bloody lot of it.

"Brake on, sir, and disconnect."

Flack beamed at him.

"Right! You'll pass in anchor work, Tregarth, by the time I've finished with you!"

Tregarth was wondering whether he'd be able to avoid personal contact with his father. It wasn't a matter of blame, dislike, condemnation: it was just that he'd been apart from the mess of it for some time and

that he hated the prospect of being drawn back into the thing called Family. In his own words he'd have said: I'm on my own, and happy; I can look after myself, and am I essential to the mess *they*'ve made? Do they have to mix me into it? It was bad enough just having to read his mother's letters, having to write back again and tell her: No, I don't need any money; I'm on my own and I manage. Once she'd ignored it, told him in an air letter-card that she'd sent twenty pounds to a bank in Alexandria, and he'd spent a day's pay on a cable telling her that he didn't want it. Then he'd had a notice from the bank, and he'd gone ashore to tell them to return the credit to England.

Flack broke into his thoughts again.

"After we've slipped, what do we do with the Blake?"

Tregarth nodded.

He said: "Yes, sir."

"Tregarth!"

"Sir?"

"I asked you, after we slip, what do we do with the Blake?"

Tregarth thought: I could make a suggestion.

He told Flack: "Shackle on as low down on the cable as it'll go."

There was movement on the bridge, the Captain's head and shoulders were in sight over the screen, he was looking down intently at the foc's'le, and Flack, conscious of being under observation, drew himself up and, by mistake, clicked his heels. The fo'c'sle telephone, which was plugged into a watertight connection, buzzed angrily, and the sailor who should have been wearing the headset jerked it out of the tin box and forced the tangled mass of wire down over his head.

"Foc's'le? . . . Stand by to slip." He yelled to Flack, who stood only a couple of feet away and still at attention. "Stand by, sir!"

Flack nodded. He told the blacksmith: "Stand by."

The blacksmith had his hammer poised.

Tregarth told Flack, mechanically: "Then lash the parts of the slip to the cable, sir."

Wasn't this a plain sight of it? Here they were putting to sea for the first time in weeks, and this time for some satisfactory purpose, not just an exercise; it was a time for excitement, pleasurable anticipation, but instead of that, the sight of a man sent him back into—hell, he thought, the hell; can't I forget it? Is it anything to do with me now? Does it stretch *this* far?

"Eh?" Flack had his eyes on the wing of the bridge, where a signalman stood with a hand-flag raised. "What's that, Tregarth?"

"You asked me what to do with the Blake, sir."

The flag came down, and Flack shouted: "Slip!"

At the same time the communications man—the one with the telephone—called out: "Slip, sir!"

The blacksmith's hammer swung with practised accuracy at the hinged flap on the slip, the link flew back and the wire ran out singing through the ring on the buoy, while the other end of it was hauled inboard by a dozen seamen running aft with it in their hands. *Pelorus* backed away from her buoy, turning, swinging her long bow around towards the harbour-mouth.

Again the telephone buzzed, and the communications rating relayed to Flack: "Fall in for leaving harbour, sir."

Flack shouted: "Fall in!"

\*The fo'c'sle party fell into line, at ease, as the cruiser

swung her length around and the sea began to lap along her sides as she gathered way and she herself fell into her place astern of the flagship, in the broad but hardly moving wake. And astern of *Pelorus* the other cruisers followed, each fine and delicate with their slanting masts and the thin, high funnels, graceful lines and a gentle flutter of signal flags belying the real power of their intended purpose. These ships, all of them, had 'shown the flag' in times of peace; they'd trained men and tested equipment, attended reviews: their decks above and below had echoed to a million formal bugle-calls. Now, with easy supple grace, the line of cruisers slid out into the Mediterranean: again they'd be 'showing their flag'—but in a different way. The ensigns they flew now were clean, untattered, but in each ship the Ycoman of Signals had close to hand and ready for the halyards the battle ensign, tattered, not so clean, yet whiter than all the others. And far more precious. When the battle ensign breaks at the masthead it's the velvet glove that leaves the hard grey steel of her, it's her teeth allowed to show. You could say it's England, as she used to be: as she can be now, when she's given her head; and as the ships met and rose to the gentle swell of the sea outside, you could see that they were happy, the same as you could see on the faces of the men that one or two or three hundred years had made not the slightest difference to their hearts.

Lieutenant Hasty, R.N.V.R., the Air Defence Officer, settled his tin helmet (marked ADO in big white letters around the front part of its rim) squarely on his small, roundish head, and asked the sailor who sat behind the Radar Plot:

“Well, Forster? Tested communications?”

The Leading Seaman shook his head. He was holding the headset in place with his left hand: the screw had come loose and the set wasn't holding as it should. He took it off and slid the metal band in under the screw.

“No, sir, I ain't. Can't hear nothing, sir, out of this lot. Reckon the set's flipped, sir.”

Hasty raised his eyebrows. There was a lady who'd once said that she liked the way his forehead creased when he raised them, and since she'd said that he did it often, feeling that the lines up there gave his face 'character'. He was a tall, slim youngster, and he looked as though he'd be more at home in a seaside repertory company than on a warship's bridge. He kept his eyebrows raised, and asked:

• “Flipped, Forster? *Flipped?* Who'd do that to a telephone?”

Forster spoke into his mouthpiece: he had the headset adjusted now, the ear-phones settled over his ears.

“Radar Plot 'ere. Radar Plot. Testing communications—d'ye hear there?” He paused, listening, then glanced up at Hasty. “Either it's flipped, sir, or they're all flippin' well deaf.”

Hasty heard Tregarth testing communications from the ADO's sight on the port side of the bridge. Tregarth's voice was easy, not hurried, a part of the routine.

• “ADO port, ADO starboard: testing communications.” There was a moment of silence, and again: “ADO port—ADO starboard.” A mutter, softer: “Jimmy, you useless bastard—test the bloody phone!”

• Hasty moved three or four paces across the bridge, and peered round the corner at the other sight. No



wonder Tregarth wasn't getting any answer—Wentworth hadn't closed up. For that matter, there was no reason why he should have—action stations hadn't been sounded yet; only, since it was a matter of routine, this standing-by at dusk, most of the bridge staff were in their places, testing telephones and circuits, adjusting binoculars, taking over their action stations from the men who'd been on watch. Peabody was doubled over the chart-table, fiddling with the switch of the concealed lighting which would illuminate the chart and yet not show a light into the outer dark when later he'd let down the rolled canvas screen behind his back. Another navigator would have found the lighting out of order and sent for an L.T.O.—an electrician—to fix it. Not Peabody. Peabody fixed it himself, the way he wanted it, and no damned mechanic greasing up his charts. Captain Muir sat hunched on the tall stool which he'd had built in close to the bridge voice-pipe—the one that led down 'rto the steering position just under the bridge. Muir's enormous hands just about covered the binoculars which he held now at his eyes as he swept the horizon minutely and tirelessly from five on the starboard bow (from the flagship, which lay and thrashed her white wake ahead of them) round to the beam and back again to start the sweep at the bow. He seemed altogether unconscious of the Officer-of-the-Watch, close to his elbow, who was turning over his job to Flack, or of Peabody muttering cheerful curses at the chart-table just behind him, or of the steady, constant movement on the bridge's after end, where look-outs and signalmen and the crew of the director tower were changing over. This closing-up to action stations now was not much more than a drill, a routine: formality.

It'd be this time tomorrow that there'd be more purpose in it. By this time tomorrow they'd be moving into the comparatively narrow waters south of Crete—the passage known, accurately enough, as Stuka Alley. From tomorrow afternoon, say three o'clock, until dark, that'd be the first period of sustained air attack. And dawn on Thursday would be another hour in which the enemy could certainly be expected to do his damndest. Those two times—the dusk of Wednesday and Thursday's dawn—those would be the worst. In between them, the convoy 'd run the gauntlet of the narrow waters under the blessed cover of dark. Dark—that was worth more than a dozen Hurricanes or Beau-fighters that never showed up either until it was too late (because they can't bloody well navigate, Muir thought) or not at all (because the Army needs them more than we do). But there were Spitfires now, in Malta—Spitfires that had been flown in from carriers from the west, and on Friday—the third and last day—there'd be cover from the Malta squadrons. God bless them, Muir thought; God bless the silly young bastards: He remembered a time when the defence of Malta had rested on the stubby power of three obsolete Gladiators, and their pilots had been cheered by the Malts when they went shopping in Valetta. The garrison had christened those three 'planes Faith, Hope and Charity. The first two names were all right, but the last seemed wrong. There wasn't much charity in the sky over Malta in those days. Faith, yes, and Hope: plenty of that, plenty of both, but the sky was too full of Stukas for Charity to get much of a look in. Even the submarines, when they came in from their patrols for rest, had to leave harbour each morning and spend the day

lying bottomed outside to avoid the bombing attacks. *They* had no time for Charity, either. Muir wondered, vaguely: Will any of us ever have time for it again? Haven't we just about cut it down? Then he thought: Rubbish! This is where it starts and where men see and feel it most. Descourt, the Commander, broke in to his thoughts, which in any case were only a background to the steady, relentless sweeping of his glasses.

"Captain, sir. Eighteen-twenty. Sound off?"

"Yes, please, Descourt. Carry on."

The Commander turned his bitter face (bitter from pains in the back, from agony in the limbs: the ship's company had nicknamed him 'Old Gaiety' because he was always so damned acid, and they didn't know that to him it was indeed like acid, the pain; they had no idea that he'd been retired through ill health years before this war started, and that he'd only got into it through a certificate supplied by a doctor who was Descourt's son-in-law and had been plainly brow-beaten into writing the 'c': they didn't know that Descourt had earned that Bar to his D.S.C. in the first month of this war, when he'd been sunk off Greenland, and ought, by rights, to be well and truly dead from the long cold hours on the edge of a Carley float), he turned his lined bone face towards the after-end of the bridge and snapped at the waiting Marine Bugler: "Sound off!"

The boy saluted, whirled on his heel, took two steps along the port side of the bridge to the entrance of the steel shelter under the director tower. The bugler was still so much of a boy that he didn't even have to bend his head to pass in through the steel arch: as he moved aft and into the shelter Tregarth, who had finished trying to test his telephone set and had swung round on

his swivel seat to watch the comings and goings on the bridge, noticed that the bugler was rhyming the bugle's mouthpiece with the thumb of his left hand and preparing his lips for the call by drawing them in and out and twisting them against each other like—like—Tregarth thought, like a horse in a stable working its behind. Then he heard the switch and the hum, an intake of breath before the breathless, burning bugle-call that burst the boredom out of routine. It didn't sound like routine, the way it came out of the loudspeakers: it was action stations, and those full notes, their hard rhythm and their urgency, were synonymous with the throbbing drone of bombers' engines' grinding ugly throb and the diving Stukas' strident shriek. Synonymous because they'd come together before. It was a matter more of experience than of sound or thought.

As the bugle's last note died hard and angry over the heads of the rush of men who were pouring up the ladders to the bridge decks and to the bridge itself, Major Simon Tregarth, who had in the previous minute been finding his way leisurely and hesitantly for'ard and to the ladders' start, was taken in that rush like a piece of driftwood suddenly overtaken by a tide-race, forced and flung along the tide's set channels and eventually swept aside into an eddy which was a comparatively quiet corner of the bridge. There seemed to him to be less purpose than chaos in the sudden uproar. These weren't sailors, they weren't even humans: they were violent, thrusting fiends, faceless in the mass, yet each in fierce competition against his fellows up those narrow steel ladders—only from their language could they be identified as sailors.

Bewildered, the Major was ejected from the last ladder into the centre of the bridge, and the continued violence of the stream threw him aside and out of its path into a clear space where a red-headed seaman, sitting behind a round, glass-topped table, was shouting over the din: 'Bogey, sir, Bogey, one-seven-oh at twenty-five thousand, opening slow, sir!'

The sailor jabbed viciously with a thick blue pencil at a point on the table. He wore a telephone-set over his head, with the receivers flattening his bright red ears, and he yelled at the tall, disinterested-looking officer who was standing close beside him: "Bearing steady, sir, opening!"

Lieutenant Hasty muttered, obviously puzzled: "Watch it."

Then Peabody came shouldering his way through the thinning stream of sailors, and Major Tregarth recognised him as the man he'd met in the boat and who had introduced him to the Captain.

Peabody grabbed Hasty's arm, told him quietly: "For Christ's sake, Quicky, leave it! It's Ras-el-Tin lighthouse. Tell 'em to wake up."

Hasty only goggled, but the red-haired sailor grinned savagely and yelled into his mouthpiece: "Radar plot, radar! That bugger's Razzle Tin: come off it!"

Hasty told him: "Forster. The word is 'disregard'. Not 'come off it'. Just *disregard*."

Peabody greeted the soldier, perhaps taking pity on his obvious bewilderment.

"Anyone looking after you, Major?—Hasty, perhaps you'd show this officer round the bridge: you aren't busy, are you?"

Hasty saluted Major Tregarth.

"Pleasure, sir . . ."

Peabody nodded to the soldier, and went back to his chart-table. The rush was over, the bridge settled down to a succession of orders and reports.

"You—er—you taking passage to Malta, sir?"

Simon nodded.

"If that's where we're going, yes."

He stiffened inwardly, felt himself checked hard as he heard his son's voice: "ADO port, P one and two, testing communications. . . . Very good."

Hasty noticed the Major's interest. He told him: "That's the port-side sight, sir. Come to it in a minute: we'll start here."

He pointed at the glassed table, and Simon saw that from the centre it was ringed evenly with blue lines and spoked with radiating yellow ones.

Hasty said: "This is the Air Defence Plot. Radar reports come in over this 'phone, here"—he pointed at Leading Seaman Forster, who wore a fixed and ugly grin in the exertion of picking the remnants of a corned-beef supper out of the gaps in his teeth—"and with the centre representing the ship's position, we plot the relative positions and movements of hostile and friendly aircraft. Down below the bridge, here, there's a Fighter Direction Position, and from that we can direct our own air-cover to intercept Bogeys."

"Bogeys?"

"Sorry. Enemy aircraft. Only now we aren't doing it—the flagship is. D'you know, sir, they've got a chap called a Fighter Direction Officer—he used to be a reporter on the London *Daily Sun*—and he told me that they trained him with a lot of other FDO's at a place in Devon where they sit them on Walls' ice-cream

machines with sacks over their heads and make them go rushing at full pedal round a sort of parade-ground crashing into each other and pretending to be fighter aircraft."

Tregarth nodded. "Really? Does that teach them much?"

"Doubt it. But it doesn't matter here, because we never get any fighter cover, anyway. Now, sir, these sights——"

Together they moved round the corner of the bridge, and Simon Tregarth saw his son sitting on a wide seat like a motor-cycle's in front of a pedestal which was fitted on top with an outsize pair of binoculars.

Hasty told him: "There's one on each side, and a midshipman on each. When he gets the target in his glasses he shoves that switch over"—Hasty pointed to a switch set in the pedestal, under the mounted binoculars—"and the Director can line up the pointer in their dial with one that's linked with this sight: then they get the same target. . . . See what I mean, sir?"

Simon Tregarth nodded wisely. He didn't see any of it very clearly. First and foremost he saw his son: Peter had glanced at him once, quickly, then hidden his eyes again at the binoculars.

Hasty drew a breath, and continued: "There are three look-outs with ordinary glasses in the bays on each side—here—you see? When they report something, the Snotty lines up on the report—very simple, really. Through their telephone sets the two Snotties on either side can talk to each other and to the Director and to the four-inch guns on their own side . . . d'you see, sir?"

Simon Tregarth nodded again. He said, flatly:

"Ingenious. Very interesting." What in hell had this smooth-faced creature been telling him? Pointers—directors—look-outs and guns. Who gave a damn? He added, lamely: "Thanks very much: most interesting."

From the front of the bridge came Muir's voice.

"Hasty! Hasty! Where's Hasty? Steele—where the devil's Hasty?"

"Excuse me, sir—I'm wanted."

Hasty ran for'ard. Simon Tregarth turned slowly to stare at his son's back. He thought: This is just plain stupid: this is my *son*. There isn't anything else about it, there isn't any complication here.

"Peter." The boy didn't seem to have heard, and Simon stepped forward, put a hand on his son's arm. "Peter——"

The midshipman sat back on his seat, away from the eye-pieces. He told his father: "If you don't mind, sir, I'd rather——"

"To hell with that rubbish. I'm your father ——."

"Yes, sir."

Did there always have to be this suction, this insistence on unfortunate and painful ties? If a man was strong enough to ignore the emotional lure of it, experienced enough in what it brought to do without it, hadn't he a right to live his own life and forget the other? Did he owe anything to the links?

"Yes, sir. . . . Lieutenant Hasty didn't quite cover it, sir. From this sight I also control the four-inch for star-shell shoots: illuminating the target for bombardments and surface shoots. At surface action stations I have an L.T.O.—an electrical rating—who works that panel of instruments. We——"

"Peter, stop talking like a baby in a high chair. When



I saw you in that boat I thought you looked as though you'd grown up; I was proud to see——"

"Yes, sir." (Talk, keep away from it, the sentiment he and she'd both loved and even used on each other quite often, particularly after the worst quarrels, when they both looked as though they actually believed in it, and I their child knew that it was worth about as much as the crackling on the pork.) "Those instruments take the settings for the wind force and velocity and our own speed, and if it's a moving target, for the target's estimated course and speed; they set off an allowance for all that, and——"

"Shut up, Peter. *Shut up*, damn you! and listen to me!"

There was a pause then, the boy hearing that early tremble of anger which had terrified him time and time again, hearing that threat of power, and knowing again, even now, the same shiver in his stomach: there should now, to complete it, come a woman's rising shrillness in defence, fury matching anger, all of it growing until he grabbed that old familiar, lonely cloud which he'd learnt to conjure out of nothing to shield himself against—against what he'd left behind, he told himself, against what doesn't own me now and never will again.

He grabbed the cloud, and he told his father: "I don't have to shut up, or to talk about things I've left behind. I ask for nothing from you, sir, or from my mother, and I never will. All I ask is to be left on my own."

Peter thought: How easy, how splendid it'd be to turn round and shake his hand, behave to him as anyone else does to his father. To forget the background and be friends—as we could be, in circumstances like

these. But—these aren't the lasting circumstances. This is a small, intensely unfortunate incident. Somebody's joke!

"I'm perfectly all right, sir, on my own."

Simon Tregarth put one hand to his eyes. He half turned away.

"Perfectly all right, on your own? *At your age?*"

"*Because* I'm on my own. I don't think you have any right, now, to—to change that."

"*Right?* Who the hell's talking about *right*? Are you my son, or aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. . . . Only I——"

"Ashamed of me. I suppose you've heard—haven't you any faith at all? D'you believe everything, let it count against loyalty? I never heard of a son denying, except in emotional Victorian drama——"

"Not denying anything. And not influenced by——"

Peter had the mouthpiece of his headset turned downwards, and his left hand with its palm over the aperture. He told his father, "It's just all the mess isn't my business. Please . . ."

He told himself, don't be a baby. This ridiculous feeling of emotion, this silly feeling of wanting to cry, isn't *you*: it's what the thing does—the thing that you left behind—and it's a plain reason for *leaving* it behind. He stared into his glasses while his eyes cleared, he fiddled with the bearing-ring, sweeping the horizon and noticing that the light was almost gone. Then he swung round on the seat to face his father, to ask him, beg him, to let it alone. . . .

Hasty was there where his father had been a minute ago.

"Well?" Peter told the raised eyebrows.

"I thought that—the soldier was still hanging around. Been telling him about starshell and things. . . ."

Hasty jerked his head, and looking in the direction he was indicating, Peter Tregarth saw that his father was in conversation with Captain Muir, who was showing him the bird's-eye view of the navigational plot, a sighted lens which you could look down into from the bridge and see, in a lower compartment, a minute-by-minute tracing of the ship's track on a large-scale plotting chart.

Major Tregarth straightened himself from the peep-sight, and Muir told him: "We rendezvous with the convoy at daybreak. They've come' from Port Said—four ships carrying food and ammunition. We'll join them at dawn. They've an escort now of ten Hunt-class destroyers, so when we join them we'll be four cruis. rs, six fleet destroyers and ten Hunts to escort four merchant ships."

Major Tregarth smiled in the growing dark. "Should be enough, sir, shouldn't it."

Muir nodded. He couldn't very well say: There are three Italian battleships and half-a-dozen heavy cruisers that *could* come out to meet us. (In any case, you couldn't go by logic—Vian had turned away a force that size, with only a few light cruisers to meet it.)

He told the Major: "We'll get you to Malta all right, Soldier. Now—excuse me, will you?"

Simon nodded, but Captain Muir had already turned away, to the door of what the Major now saw was an appendage to the superstructure on the bridge itself.

It was a steel cubicle, built on to the for'ard end of the base of the director tower, and Peabody, joining him then at the side of the bridge, told him:

"That's the Captain's sea-cabin. He had it built specially in Pompey, before we left. It means he's never off the bridge when we're at sea—sleeps there and eats, and nothing goes on here outside that he doesn't hear. Even when he's asleep he seems to know what's coming in on the Plot."

Major Tregarth smiled. It was good to hear—this man's unspoken but unmistakable affection for his Captain. It was a note of solidity in this enveloping unreality which was all that he'd met so far. None of the rest seemed real, or even possible. It was another world, and in it was more than enough of nightmare.

Partly it was simply finding his son here. Any other man—he thought—to any other it would be a colossal stroke of luck, a soldier given passage in a warship and his son in that ship! But this isn't fortune, it's plain malignance. Could be fortune; but my son, his—— Simon thought: Well, perhaps the shock of it is just that I'd forgotten. Perhaps in the way I care for Peter I've been separating him in my mind from his mother. Simon felt the hardness of fact growing again as he went back to it, and he thought: I've been forgetting that a large part of what made it impossible for me to stay with her was that she was deliberately influencing the boy against me, pulling him to her and giving him, wilfully, a fear of me. It's no good being angry now: I've taken the only open road, and if she had him before, I can't expect her grip on him to be weaker now. I've given it to her! I'm the Big Bad Wolf; I've done the sort of thing parsons go for from their pulpits; I've left my wife, and I have no right to expect anything from my son. But—does a man have to invoke Right to have his son acknowledge him? Does he have to advance an

argument or defence? He felt the anger rising again, and he checked it. It's not the boy; it's Jill. She's tied him hand and foot, and she's spent all of ten years forcing the child's natural affection into a sightless allegiance to herself and a blind hostility to me. Simon Tregarth thought: I asked for it, for this. Alone, now, I look to my son; but when I turned my back on Jill I left him just as consciously, because they were always so close as to be one and the same. I knew what I was doing, and I have what I asked for.

Simon told himself: I have Helen. I have her, and I want nobody else. He looked down over the side and for'ard towards the long rising and falling bow, and he had the sea's high white tumbling parting in his mind while he said to himself: Helen—I have her, Helen: in his mind he saw her, and it was a vague image, because no clear or accurate thought did justice to the whole of her. The sea was hissing down there, hissing and slapping, and the voice-pipe or whatever it was—this tube thing and a sort of rack beside it, they rattled in time to the engines' throb, the rhythm of the cruiser's progress, and Simon Tregarth wondered: Do they get used to this, to this rattle and the cold stench of metal? He turned his head, saw dark figures motionless on the front of the bridge, heard now and then a word or two spoken quietly aside or into a voice-pipe: this and the rise and fall, the steady sweep of sea: looking up, he saw the radar aerial turning, sweeping slowly, steadily, probing the dark. He wondered: How many men are in this thing now, watching and guiding its instruments, guiding its eyes, waiting, needing sleep, and each of them with his own past and present and worries and hopes—how many? To the outside eye, to a periscope,

only a comparatively small grey shape butting through a gentle swell across the Mediterranean. An impersonal, vulnerable thing.

Simon Tregarth told himself: Can't blame the boy. I gave him up, when I gave up Jill. And when I left Jill I only left because of Helen. Jill I had come to loathe—no, he told himself, honestly, no, not loathed: just I was sick of the battle; I'd given up—I never loathed her. For a lifetime nothing had come of anything except that I was making money, doing well: perhaps it was that money that brought the whole pointlessness of it close, so that I saw it and knew that I had to break out, through my own blindness and sense of convention, and away from being content with unhappiness and no satisfaction: my son against me.

But I never hurt *him* when I left Jill. The boy was set, and his education (the sort a father pays for in cash) was finished; he was already at sea, and in leaving Jill I was not withdrawing any support from him. He (he was a child up till then, and under her powerful concentration of influence and unhappiness, I don't blame him) he had always made his choice plain: he never wanted me or confided in me, and when I and Jill were—well, most of the time—he was dumb to me and compassionate to her.

Simon thought: Can't blame the boy. Blame what I left. And for that blame me: I took it all to myself, knowingly, and no blame to Peter for what he feels now. Not even to *her*, now: it was a thing between us, and the fault which we shared was getting married. I forced that, and when all of it started sliding I tried to force it straight again, but my force was nothing, or it was applied in the wrong direction. Then, eighteen months

ago, the end came up like a brick wall, and when I saw the wall I recognised Helen. Then it was Helen. It wasn't anything but Helen, and it never will be. She never—tried: she never made an attempt. But when I knew that the rest was useless I remembered that Helen had always been there, and thinking of her then it was all so obvious, so silly that it hadn't happened before.

And so damned lovely!

## Chapter 6

"Not seasick, Major?" Peabody chuckled, and added: "Better not be, yet. Afraid we're in for a bit of a blow before long."

Simon took his hand off the edge of the bridge; he turned and faced the Navigator in the dark. Peabody had come aft again so quietly that the first sign of his presence had been that "Not seasick, Major?" Simon thought: He wouldn't have needed to tiptoe, exactly—not with this damn rattling and the wind.

He asked Peabody: "Isn't it blowing *now*?"

"Lord, no! We're doing eighteen knots, you know. But the signs say it's coming, and the weather report's 'the same. You—you've travelled much at sea?'"

"Not much. Used to cross the Channel and back, you know. And a few hellish troopships. Sick as a dog, usually: but this ship's big, isn't it?"

Peabody had the sort of laugh that made you want to laugh with him. Simon thought: This man's happy. He's lucky—when he laughs, he means it: when I laugh, I do it because it's expected of me, and there's no laughter except for the noise of it, the outward sign. But hell! he thought, shouldn't I be happy? After all that length of pretence and mutually recognised dissatisfaction, now I have Helen, and there's nothing else in my mind that I want—can't I be happy? Was there so much of the other that now I can't enjoy anything else either? Suddenly he felt like a traitor to her, to the two



of them and to what they were together, that he should now allow himself to think in terms of an old unhappiness. Hadn't they in so many words sworn to this as to the beginning of everything, for both of them the only start—nothing before and only *this*, only them and nothing else counting?

It's meeting Peter, he thought; it's meeting my son. Helen: fiercely he sought her image and the sound of her voice over the steel rattle and the pounding engines and the sea's white surge: *Helen*.

"Not so damn big, Major. No Cunarder, this: we aren't built for comfort."

"Do *you* get seasick?"

"No. But lots of us do. When it really blows up, you'll see buckets on the bridge——" Peabody caught himself. "Sorry. Not a very good host. . . . Shall I show you your sleeping quarters?"

Simon nodded.

"Thanks. They showed me, but I'm damned if I know how to get back to it. Bet me how anyone finds their way about——"

"This way."

Peabody moved across the bridge to the ladder which led down from a railed hole in its centre. There were two ladders, one leading to port and the other to starboard, and earlier on Simon had heard Commander Descourt cursing a sailor for using the wrong one: the port-side ladder was marked UP, the other DOWN. Simon realised that in the turmoil of closing-up to action stations a man going the wrong way could do a lot of harm. In a moment of insight he realised that the little details of that sort added up to fighting efficiency.

There had been no vestige of light on the silent,

watchful bridge, and it was a relief to Simon as he groped his way cautiously down the ladder to see a faint glow from shaded bulbs below. They gave a suggestion of warmth, of comfort under the cold steel and grey paint. Peabody was waiting for him at the foot of the ladder, in the dimly lit thwartships gangway.

"Like to see the chart—what we're about?"

"Yes, by Jove, I would! Very much."

Peabody pushed back a sliding door in the for'ard bulkhead, and stepped over the raised threshold. He told the Major, without looking round: "This is my charthouse."

Simon followed him in, feeling like some tourist admitted to a temple's inmost shrine. There'd been so much secrecy, so much vagueness and so many impersonal routing and embarkation orders that he'd begun to feel like a packet of sandwiches shoved into the luggage locker of a space-ship. Peabody clicked a switch: light fell yellow across the long chart-table, which was built to the whole width of the compartment.

Simon stood blinking at it while the Navigator slid the door shut behind him.

He explained: "Mustn't show a light outside."

As he spoke, the deck angled sharply under their feet, slanting suddenly to port, and Simon grabbed at the table's edge.

Peabody murmured: "Told you. Be doing that all the time soon."

"Buckets?"

"Relays of 'em." Peabody shoved one chart back out of the way, adjusted the slant of a light over another that lay on the table. "Look, Major. Here's Alex—see? This line is our course. West by north now, then at

midnight here"—he pointed with the thick end of a pair of dividers—"here we come round to north. This is where we end up at dawn—about six, when we meet the convoy. From there on we plod along this line to Malta."

"Think there'll be much trouble?"

"Oh, from the air, yes. Bound to be. Particularly here—and here. That's where we're in range of the Crete bastards. In between those bits we'll cover the distance—this stretch—during tomorrow night. They can get at us all along the line, of course, with their longer-range stuff. But by and large it should be a walk-over."

"With no fighter cover?"

"They're tied up in the bloody desert. But still, it'll be a walk-over, comparatively. Six months ago we took a convoy of seventeen ships to Malta: know how many we got there?"

Simon waited for the answer.

The Navigator's face lost some of its easy geniality. He told the soldier: "One. And that one in tow. . . . But now it's all different. Their planes are tied up, same as ours are. Turn of the tide, Major. We may even get the whole bloody issue through: something for history books, eh?"

Simon nodded. He pointed at the convoy's pencilled track, west of Crete and up to the Medina Bank, ninety miles south-east of Malta.

"How about the Eye-tie fleet?"

Peabody laid the tip of his forefinger on the chart, while both he and the soldier braced themselves to another heavy roll.

"They're here at the moment. In Taranto. The only

ones worth troubling about, that is. Intelligence don't think they'll even try to come out. But if they do—see these points?"

Simon peered at the red-linked dots which centred marked strips of the chart. The strips ringed Taranto.

"Huh?"

"Called the Steel Ring. Submarines from the Malta flotilla. That Malta crowd, sir, are hot stuff. They're already close to a million tons of sinkings. . . . And here, in the deep field, four more submarines waiting for anything that might get through." Peabody looked so happy with the picture on the chart that he might almost have planned the whole thing himself. He told Simon, pointing again at the Gulf of Taranto: "This shaded area here is a new minefield. A submarine is laying that now, tonight and tomorrow night. At this moment she's laying mines here, right on the enemy's front doorstep. . . . Well, you see? If they want to come out with their battle-wagons, first they have to pass a minefield they don't know is there: then a concentration of submarines, and outside that more submarines. And what comes out of that?—well, here are we."

"How are submarines in bad weather?"

"Handicapped. But against that, so are the Italians. They like it smooth."

"So do I, damn it!"

The quick answer, the easy, not-too-funny remark—all at ease! But underneath, nothing at ease. How could a man reconcile his useless presence in this unnatural steel box and all its strangeness and its noisy, unfamiliar purpose with the whole centre and timbre of his living, which was motivated by and directed at a wordless peace which was one woman's face. Face and

hands and body and voice, alive, meaning, thinking—nothing hidden, nothing even approaching the shadows of doubt or secrecy, all open and *real*, ecstatically tangible, and in that ecstasy honest: so damned honest in its wholeness that the word ecstasy took on a new meaning. Nothing ethereal about it. No longer something even that a word or a phrase could fit. He remembered her in the taxi, her voice lowered as he reached across her to open the door. (He had the fare and the tip in his hand, ready; he was going to walk home himself because London at six on a summer morning was a thing to enjoy slowly, not out of a taxi's window, and watching the trees in the park with that freshness of the early mist wrapping their tops, it was seeing Helen and remembering her all over again: none of this had anything to do with trees. ° °

As he'd leant across to open the door, she'd told him: "Simon. I thought I'd feel cheap, but I don't. This wasn't just an—an *incident*. Tell me it wasn't, Simon: but if it was, tell me that."

He told her, not having to *try* to make his words ring true: "Not to me."

They were out of the taxi now; she looked at him, and he could see that she hadn't bothered to notice his answer because in any case she'd been sure of it. In her eyes he could see her remembering and loving and enjoying it all over again. The early wind had an edge to it, but as the taxi rattled away he could see that all she felt was in her eyes: it was to herself that she was recalling the memory, not flattering or reassuring *him*.

She said again, for her own benefit: "Not just an evening."

More than the words, it was the expression of her

eyes and mouth that delighted him. For herself she was enjoying the thought of it, re-living, re-loving: the taxi's stopping had been no sign of any end, only a proof of this dream's reality and continuance. Without any sense of shame at the baldness of his words, he told her, out of himself and in something removed which he knew to be honest but strange, so that although they were his words, he listened to them like someone else's: "We must do it again."

It was the way he felt about it, not the way he could ever have imagined himself talking about it out loud. In what he had been, he'd have just coughed, made some noise of agreement, kissed her—not talked about it. But now it was open and there was no awkwardness, no shame, and he heard with surprise and delight his own voice telling her: "We must do it again."

"But not in London."

"Not?"

"Please." (Not a decision, no refusal: a request!) "So many people we both know. People are hell, Simon—it's dangerous. Don't let's spoil it. Please."

Peabody was telling him: "Taranto. More or less continuous."

"Sorry—what?"

"Bombing them. And mines in the harbour. Gets 'em flummoxed. Well, I expect you want to turn in?"

Simon nodded.

"Yes. If you'll show me where my hutch is."

Peabody slid the door back, clicked off the lights. He followed the Major out into the dim gangway, and passed him to lead down another ladder, another flat, a turn and a short length of passage. Simon recognised

the steel door with its heavy clip and the big padlock hanging idle. This was the place they'd shown him earlier, when he'd come aboard.

Peabody explained: "In harbour we keep it locked. Some of the instruments are supposed to be secret—but I dare say the enemy knows all about them by now. Probably did in '39. . . . This is really the FDP; only this trip we aren't using it. Got everything you want?"

Simon glanced at the low camp-bed and its folded khaki blankets. At Helen's suit-case. She'd packed his things in it, and he'd no time to argue. He saw her initials—H.R.

"I think so, thanks."

The Navigator pointed to a telephone on a bracket screwed to one of the steel walls, near the door.

"That's a direct line to the bridge, in case you need it. If they call you, you'll see the red light flashing and hear a buzz. But I don't imagine you'll want it. The——"

Heavy footsteps rounded the corner, and both of them turned to see Lieutenant-Commander Flack as he poked his head in under the door's arch.

"Hah!"

If it'd been a bark instead of a 'Hah' it might have been a hound peering at a fox in its earth. Peabody shot the Major an amused glance: One of our Specialities.

"Hello, Stringy. . . . Major Tregarth—Lieutenant-Commander Flack." He added, to Simon: "Our First Lieutenant."

Flack bent himself in under the low door, and whipped his cap off in one decisive gesture, displaying suddenly his bald and shiny head. His fingers had paused for a moment on the peak before they swept the

cap off: it was as though he was unveiling a tombstone, or perhaps that he was habitually reluctant to display his lack of hair and forced himself to the point of doing it in the way that a swimmer dives into cold water, getting the shock over quickly.

"I heard your name mentioned, Tregarth, and I wondered—please forgive the interest—I wondered if by any chance you were related to my foc's'le midshipman. He's a Tregarth, too. Eh?" When he smiled, all the teeth showed at once, like a horse with a tendency to bite. "Eh?"

"No." Simon managed to return the tall man's smile as he forced out the second-hand lie. He thought: Strange, once or twice, when he was little, I smacked the boy's bottom for not telling the truth. Now he's said that I'm not his father and I back him up. "I'm afraid not. Quite a lot of us, here and there."

"Ah. Tell you the truth, one of the starboard action look-outs told me. He suggested you might be the youngster's father! . . . Nice fellow, but I can never remember his name. Irritating. I always make a point of memorising the men's names. . . . You know, Tregarth, that young kinsman of yours'll go far. Smart lad—very quick."

Flack asked Peabody: "Pilot—you know that look-out's name. Eh?"

"Which? Several of them, aren't there?"

Flack looked surprised at the suggestion. He told Peabody: "Very *smart* fellow. Always *seeing* things. I'm sure you know him." He turned to Simon. "Anyway, this look-out chap—whatever his name is—said he was certain you two were father and son. 'Nonsense,' I told him, 'rubbish. We'd have heard about it if they were.'



Chap just grinned at me! Have you noticed, Pilot, how when you say something to a sailor, nine times out of ten he just grins? I've often puzzled over it. Often. Well—er—Soldier, I just thought I'd look you up and make sure. . . . You sleeping in here?"

Simon nodded. "Yes."

Flack asked the Navigator: "Showed him where the heads are? All that sort of thing?"

"I'm the perfect host, Stringy. Don't worry. Even told him where to find a bucket."

Flack looked personally relieved.

"You're in good hands, Major. See you in the morning, I dare say. Had some supper, I hope?"

Simon nodded again.

"Yes, thanks."

All three of them were standing like strap-hangers in a train hanging on to an overhead I-bar, and Flack to the edge of the open door. Simon could already feel the start of trouble in his stomach: the symptoms came with increasing frequency, matching exactly the steady increase in the cruiser's pitch and roll. He was looking forward to being left alone. Flack smiled cheerfully.

"Well, I'm off to turn in. Anything I can do—Oh, Peabody!"

He paused, gazed intensely at the Navigator.

"Huh?"

"Cocoa. In the morning. Can't expect him to come up on the bridge without something warm inside him. Made arrangements?"

Peabody answered patiently: "Don't worry, Stringy. It's under control."

"Splendid! Well, good-night, Tregarth. Anything you want——"

"Thanks."

Simon had an urge to push both of them out. On his own, he'd be able to cope with the grey-green curtain and his sliding stomach and watering mouth. And if the worst came to the worst he wanted to be alone when he groped down to the open deck: to be sick in private. "Good night." Flack opened his mouth to say more, but Peabody, after one look at the Major, cut in quickly:

"Then we'll leave you in peace. If you want anything, ring through on that 'phone to the bridge, and they'll send a messenger down. All set?"

"Fine."

Fine, hell! Anyone who could make jokes about this sea-sickness deserved to be shot. Or to die of sea-sickness. That'd cure their sense of humour. Peabody ushered Flack out ahead of him, giving the eccentric no chance to change his mind or to think of some new topic of conversation.

Over his shoulder Peabody told the Major: "I'd leave the door open on its clips, if I were you. Not much air otherwise, and you'll wake up with an awful bloody head. Night."

"Good night. Thanks——"

Flack went down aft to his cabin. He told himself that it wasn't worth turning-in: in a couple of hours it'd be midnight, and he had the middle watch. As senior watch-keeping officer it was his job to arrange the roster of bridge watches, and since the worst watch of all was the 'middle'—the midnight to 4 a.m. stretch—he always gave it to himself on the first night at sea. Behind this determination went a great deal of thought. He could

say then: I gave myself the 'middle', first night out: and as the cruiser's periods at sea were usually short, he lost on the deal—he stood more twelve-to-four watches than the others did. Thinking of that did him good—"Show them I'm not the sort of man that takes advantage of his seniority. All pull together, ch?" But privately he was aware of other considerations. Those short periods at sea were usually exercises, manœuvres, and night exercises at that—during the middle watch it was ten to one that every man'd be at action stations, and the only men who scored on the deal were those who in any case would have been on watch. Flack, for instance. The others were at action stations during those four hours when otherwise they'd have been asleep, and when the exercise ended at daybreak the middle watchmen had lost only two hours of their quota of sleep, while everyone else had lost four or six.

"Luck of the game!" he'd say, grinning over his breakfast, knowing that his next watch wouldn't be until the First Dog—the 4 to 6 p.m. "Luck of the game!" And he'd help himself, grinning, to more coffee.

There were four watch-keepers, and seven watches in each twenty-four hours, and that was the way it worked. Having that awful 'middle' on the first night at sea meant that he wouldn't have it again until the fifth night. Five days and nights, in the Mediterranean, was a long time to be out of harbour: the 'middle' didn't often come more than once, to Flack. Nor did it to the others: but at any rate, when he'd done it once, when he'd handed over to his relief at four in the morning with the first night over and done with, he enjoyed a sense of deliverance, of having *got-it-over-with*. Flack

hated the 'middle': no time to sleep before it, and when you were relieved there was only at most an hour and a half before dawn 'Action stations' were sounded.

On the fourth day, if they were at sea that long, he'd have the first—the eight to midnight. Then he'd have to turn the watch over to the man who came on at midnight for the dreaded 'middle'. It was always a difficult moment: Flack would be torn between a weird jubilation in the sensation of handing over to his sleepy, disgruntled colleague the dreadful stretch that lay ahead, yet at the same time aware of calamity closing in: tomorrow night, and himself for the middle watch. The full circle and the hell of the 'middle'!

But tonight he had no dreads, no agony of spirit. He'd be taking over from a man who'd have the 'middle' not tomorrow night, but the one after, and in taking over he'd be thinking: Hah, I'm getting it over; in four hours' time I'll be clear of it—you've still got it to come! And his midnight merriment would be a sign of his pulling-his-weight, taking the worst watch first and not caring a hoot!

Well, no point in catching an hour and a half's sleep now. Do more harm than good. And besides, he wanted to get stuck into Act Three of his new play. Flack had decided, a couple of years ago, that while he was, of course, entirely competent in his duties and would (given the opportunity) make an exceptionally fine and progressive Admiral, he was not really cut out for a naval career. His artistic and literary ability should have framed his true future: and it was never too late to start. He'd heard that said often, and he felt, sincerely, that it applied to his own situation and intentions to such an extent that the phrase might have been

originated in pure application to the future of Flack. *This* was the real thing! And since the knowledge of his buried talent had burst upon him, he had in fact proved the truth of it by completing eleven short stories and three long plays. They had not been accepted, or even stirred interest: but that, too, he understood. His naval background, his enforced participation in matters separate from Art, this background was to him as much a disadvantage, cause of anguish and dissatisfaction, as were a pair of stunted legs to Toulouse-Lautrec. One day, he had no doubt, he would be recognised: he alone knew the value of these rejected proofs of his smothered brilliance. Thoughts of them moved him strongly now, as he fingered through the pile of typescript under the clean vests and pants in the lower drawer of his only piece of furniture. Reluctantly abandoning them (they were his favourite plays and stories: he didn't give a hoot for Barrie or Galsworthy or for this new chap, Maugham) in favour of the torpedo log and progress book which he had pinched from a cupboard in the Gunner (T)'s office, and in which his new masterpiece was taking its own peculiar shape, he told himself grimly: "So-and-so was never read until he was sixty. All the young ones come to grief. In literature a man's years are nothing, once his ability is recognised. A man can die unknown, and"—he thought deliriously—"yes, one day my sister's children may say, not 'My mother was Carrie Hooper', but 'I am a nephew of William Flack, the playwright!'"

Now—Act Three. He'd left them in the drawing-room, Mrs Harmitage and her daughter Celestine, and Mrs Harmitage had been telling Celestine, in gently damning words, why young Lieutenant Bombard was

no fit mate for any daughter of hers. The situation had become so subtly tense that Flack had felt compelled to break the scene and the act, to give the audience a few minutes' rest: a chance to think it over, to absorb the lingering atmosphere of his sweetly bitter. . . . Well—he chuckled to himself as he drew the cap off his fountain pen, and he told himself: Not for me to put words to it. Leave *that* to the critics! In his long, flowing scrawl he opened the new scene.

*Celestine*: But, Mother, dear! He is more than just a naval officer! He has great literary talents! Indeed, some verses of his which (she blushes charmingly) which he was good enough to read to me, were so very moving that I——”

*Mrs H*: Yes, child? That you ——?”

*Celestine*: Oh, Mother —*please* understand!”

*Mrs H*: Celestine.

Flack laid down his pen, and nodded at the script. That's it, he thought, that's the mark: *that's* what the public wants! He thought: Funny, some days I can't write a word, and others, like this—well, it just flows. I mustn't waste the opportunity, the moment. He picked up his pen again, smiling, and he allowed Mrs H. a little more rope.

*Mrs H.*: “Celestine! Has this affair gone farther than I know?”

Alone in his cabin, Flack wrote on. Page after page of 'Their Lordships' best foolscap was added to the pile on his left: still he wrote, oblivious to the increasing violence of the ship's pitch and roll, to the shudder from her stern when the bow plunged low in a trough of the

sea and her rising after end brought the screws into lighter surface water so that they began to race. The heel this way and that every few minutes, when *Pelorus* flung herself from one leg of the anti-submarine zigzag to another, left him unmoved: he was in the Harmitage's drawing-room, not in a ship of war: there was to him no creak, no shudder, no movement other than that of his pen as it raced across the paper, and all the time he was fighting an urge to allow the two ladies to come to terms. He would have loved to have them see each other's point of view—he was a man of peace and troubled by continued discord—but he held himself in check, knowing that any such weakness now would absolutely wreck Act Four.

At eleven-forty a sailor in a duffle-coat banged on the bulkhead, parted the curtains and peered at the engrossed Lieutenant-Commander.

"Yes, Hawkins? What is it?"

The man's name was Dumbleton. He removed his cap.

"Twenty minutes to the 'middle', sir. Lieutenant 'Arris said to call you."

Flack glanced at his watch. He'd forgotten all about the 'middle'. Just as well Harris had sent down: otherwise the fracas in the drawing-room might have lasted right through till dawn 'action stations'.

"Hah." Flack smiled affably at the sailor. "My compliments to the Officer-of-the-Watch, and I'll be up in a few minutes. Thank you, Hawkins."

"Aye, sir."

The sailor replaced his cap. His pale, calm eyes flickered across Flack's desk, rested on the piles of foolscap. He thought. 'Ell! What's the old bugger up to

now? He stepped out into the gangway, jerked the curtains across in front of his face, and Flack heard him thump away on rubber soles.

Flack stuffed his night's work away between the covers of the torpedo log and progress book, and stowed it carefully under the clean underwear in the drawer. He removed his uniform, and forced his legs into a pair of ankle-length woollen pants. Taking off his tie, he changed to a flannel shirt and put his uniform back on, with two pullovers under the reefer jacket and a white scarf around his neck. Bulging, he dragged on a stiff, Admiralty-issue oilskin coat. He settled his cap firmly against the wind, and, by now grimly miserable, switched off the desk-light and stepped out into the bare deserted gangway. Ten minutes to midnight. . . . Flack climbed to the upper deck, the nails in his boots scraping on the steel ladder. With the utmost distaste, he forced the canvas screen aside and stepped out into the wind.

It was blowing Force 6, and the wind was fine on the bow. He could hear sea pounding on the fo'c'sle, and even here, right aft on the bucking cruiser, the air was wet with spray. The iron deck was slippery, gleaming wet under the stars: Flack steadied himself for a minute, letting his eyes get the hang of the dark before he set off for the bridge. Out there stretched and rolled and danced the flying lunacy of sea, that awful wilderness of water: its surface, light and flying white, only accentuated the real depth and power and crushing weight of the sea itself. Flack had a sense of man's precocity upon this vast and reckless mass; he looked out into the noise of it, and in his imagination (the slippery, heaving and tilting deck) he saw himself swept over, felt the



horror of that sudden, lonely cry: "Man overboard!"—a cry he'd heard more than once in his lifetime—and the knowledge always there that a man alone in a rough sea stood as much chance of being found as a needle would in a hundred haystacks. He groped his way for'ard, hating the sea and at the same time loving it, fearing it, yet at the same time knowing that he'd be lost without it: that when Their Lordships dropped him on the beach he'd be a man without a love, without a hate—no man at all, like anything else washed up out of the tide's reach, bleached and lifeless and only a curiosity, an oddity: something the sea had taken the guts and the life out of and given nothing to in return.

Not the sea's fault, he thought, looking sideways at its tumbled, silly anger. Not its fault. If I was *in* it I wouldn't stand a chance, not a hope, but my end won't be the sea's doing. The sea doesn't write reports or cancel promotions.

With his hand on the cold, slithery-wet steel of the next ladder, he corrected himself. Rubbish! he told himself, nonsense! Nothing to be bitter about! You've spent your life in the Service, and you know its system, standards and expectations. You haven't measured up, that's all. He knew it to be true, told himself: *You haven't measured up*: he climbed the ladder, and its hard coldness matched the hardness of his thoughts: You're an old fool, William Flack; you never had the *go*, and now you can only see it through as long as they'll let you. Then you'll live in a boarding-house in some seaside resort, and in the lounge you'll bore new-comers to the stage of near-rudeness: when you get the rudeness you'll creep down to the sea-wall in your threadbare suit and you'll hear the sea shout in its anger and

whisper in its sleep: it can say the same damn thing over and over again, and *you* won't be bored. You'll have an urge to explain to it how you came to be where you are: but the sea won't listen and the waves won't care.

He looked down from the height of the fo'c'sle's break and felt the wet, salt wind in his face: suddenly he thought: *Now!—it'd be quick! Better than the years, the useless hanging-on? Now?* For a brief moment of shocked excitement and horror the idea held him, then in his mind again he heard the shout: "Man overboard!"; saw the helpless tossed and smothered anonymous figure—only, no longer anonymous. Trembling, he wrenched himself from the picture, turned to face the solid, towering bridge, man-made and real, square-edged and present fact. The sight of it brought him with a jerk to closer, factual problems. To the 'middle': and, with his dislike of that, to a realisation of the fact that all the playwriting and dabbling at short stories were only a sort of drug which he administered to himself in the same way that another man might turn to liquor or to dope. He knew, at this moment, that the only difference between his own escapism and those others was that his own, pointless as it was, cost him nothing: gave the same relief, and left no hangover. Unless, perhaps, this was it.

Briskly, determinedly, Lieutenant-Commander Flack climbed the ladder to the bridge.

Harris told him: "Hang on a mo', Stringy. Altering course."

Flack remained silent, standing close on the other side of the binnacle and seeing more each minute as his eyes settled to the dark. It was a warmish wind, and

damp, salt-damp and sticky: the copper ears of the voice-pipes stank acidly of must and salt. Dead ahead, the blue-shaded light on the flagship's stern dipped and dimmed and brightened again rising, and *Pelorus* herself was crashing down into the rollers as they swept aft and left a trough under her nose: then her stern began to sink as she bulldozed her bow up another huge wave, and the speed of her soaring bow hurled a solid mass of sea back at the for'ard turrets down there under the front of the bridge. The sea came down crashing, thundering, the top of it flopping over 'A' turret and the rest flooding over the fo'c'sle breakwater and hissing in a white lather into the scuppers and over the side, swamping across with the list of the ship.

From the bridge's starboard wing the Yeoman of Signals called: "Executive, sir!"

Captain Muir, crouched like some huge anthropoid on his high stool, nodded in the dark.

"Very good. Carry on, Hal'is."

"Aye aye, sir."

Harris, the Officer-of-the-Watch, had his binoculars trained on the flagship's blue sternlight. All of them on the bridge watched the leading ship's sudden swing to starboard, her silhouette broadening against the low stars, the line of white, broken water lengthening along her side. As she swung, leading the other cruisers on to their new course, the men in *Pelorus's* bridge could see her movements, falling bow and ponderously rising stern, a heavy list as she straightened, sea surging over her fo'c'sle.

"Starboard fifteen."

Harris had been waiting for the exact moment when he could turn *Pelorus's* bow just inside the flagship's

broad white wake. With the forward impetus of seventeen knots, *Pelorus* would be carried outwards on the turn, so that to end up on the new course and still dead astern of the flagship, it was necessary to start the turn well inside that leading wake.

"Ease to ten."

Harris was aware of the Captain's silent, minute observation of his orders and their effect.

The Quartermaster called back, his voice remote and hollow out of the copper tube: "Ease to ten, sir. Ten of starboard wheel on, sir."

"Midships!"

Light glowed softly in the compass dial, and Harris flashed it a quick glance before he looked up again at the moving speck of blue which marked the flagship's stern. Sometimes it vanished altogether, and you had to guess until it came again. . . .

"Wheel's amidships, sir."

The Quartermaster was warm, down there in the little compartment under their feet, probably chewing gum or sucking peppermints. Harris thought he could detect a slight whiff of peppermint from the voice-pipe each time he bent to pass an order.

"Steady!"

"Steady, sir! Three-five-seven, sir."

"Steer north."

"Steer north, sir—course. . . . *North*, sir!"

"Very good." Harris checked the compass repeater on the bridge. He told Captain Muir: "Course north, sir."

Muir grunted: it might have been smoker's cough or a burp or just a grunt. It could have meant anything, but in fact it was just one of the sounds which Muir em-

ployed when he had to say something and couldn't be bothered to open his mouth. He climbed down from his stool and faced aft: faced Flack, and peered into his face.

"Oh. You relieving Harris, Number One?"

"Yes, sir." Flack raised his right hand to the peak of his cap. "The 'middle', sir."

"I didn't think it was the blasted afternoon. Call me at three."

"Aye aye, sir."

Muir moved aft across the bridge in a few long strides which took him to the door of the steel shelter he slept in.

Flack turned to Harris.

"Ready?"

"Uh. Course north. Revs . . ."

Quietly, forgetting to display his usual cheerfulness, Flack took the safety of the ship and the lives of her men into his long, creased hand

## *Chapter 7*

MIDSHIPMAN PETER TREGARTH took over the 'middle' at twelve-thirty. The bridge personnel changed watches at 'staggered' times—at the hour, the quarter and the half—so that at no one moment would the whole routine be in a state of change, at no time would every pair of eyes be new to the dark, men sleepy and slow-witted. Tregarth took over and came for'ard to speak to the Midshipman-of-the-Watch.

"Course and speed?"

"Eh?" Flack interrupted. "That you, Tregarth?"

"Yes, sir. I was asking for course and speed for the starshell control."

"Hah. Zigging, of course, but mean course north. Zigging twenty degrees each side. Spced seventeen. All right?"

"Thank you, sir."

Tregarth waited until Flack had moved back to the front of the bridge, then he asked the Midshipman-of-the-Watch: "Snake. What's wind supposed to be?"

"North and Force 6. And bloody awful. What do you care?"

"Have to put it on the starshell thing. Cheero."

He slanted back aft across the heaving steel deck, and checked the dials in the starshell control box. Then he climbed into the ADO's seat and adjusted the width and focus of the big glasses: they were hazed with damp, so he cleaned them at both ends before he moved around

the front of the Captain's shelter and did the same things to the port-side mounting. He thought: Both of them'll be mucked up again in half an hour. He tested the headsets to the director and to the four-inch guns, then joined Able Seaman Burgess at the Air Defence Plot.

"O.K.?"

Burgess's eyes were heavy-lidded, dull with the ache to sleep. He'd been ashore last night—only just caught the last boat off—and he wasn't as well as he might have been. He nodded dourly at the midshipman.

"Flip-all doin', sir."

"Tested communications?"

"Knocker White did before I came on, sir."

"Better do it again."

"*Again*, sir?"

"Again."

Burgess glared resentfully at the circular plotting table.

"Bridge—radar! Bridge—radar!" He looked puzzled, raised a hand and tapped at the mouthpiece of his headset. He informed Tregarth: "Something wrong, sir. Seems dead."

"Switched on?"

The sailor fumbled for the switch, looking surprised and hurt at the suggestion that it might not have been on. Tregarth heard it click across.

"Must've flicked off, sir. . . . Very loose, it is. Bridge, radar!"

You had to be close to a man to hear him shout. The outside roar and pound of wind and sea were an envelope to the inner sharpness of creaking, rattling and vibrating metal: unless they were raised and sharp.

voices were nothing to this. Yet the surrounding and ceaseless noise was, in itself, a sort of silence. Less noise than environment. Here, six yards or so from the front of the bridge, Flack's bellow into the Quartermaster's voice-pipe was no sound at all—only a tall, shapeless figure that stooped to the voice-pipe and straightened itself again. As far as the bridge was concerned, the figure hadn't spoken: only the helmsman swung his wheel and threw the ship off another twenty degrees to one side or the other, following the zigzag: the wind came in from a different angle until Flack's oil-skinned figure bent again.

Ahead, the small, blue light dimmed and vanished and flickered, and Flack, now and then, used his distance-keeper—a sort of pocket range-finder on the flagship's shady intermittent silhouette to keep the distance between them right so that when (as he might at any moment, take no notice of the "Call me at three") Captain Muir shot out of his shelter and climbed into his tall stool, he'd have no excuse to insult the Officer-of-the-Watch for being inside station, or ætern of it. The 'distance apart' was ordered, set down in the Night Orders in Muir's own neat handwriting, and if he'd written, "Two cables"—well, he didn't mean two-and-a-half, and he wouldn't excuse one and three quarters. Weather or no weather. Occasionally Flack'd order a change of revolutions, change amounting to a fraction of a knot in speed: and while the fleet ploughed on to meet the convoy, churning the disordered sea astern into a wide track of froth across the heaving waves, more than a thousand men in all those ships, in cramped compartments or on open, wind-swept decks, watched their instruments or just stayed



awake or had their eyes on the sea, did the jobs they were trained for: and at heart they had their million personal problems. Put a trance on Knocker White, climbing at this moment into his hammock, ask him quickly in his mind: Penny for your thoughts? He'd tell you: Me Old Man's playing-up again: I'm worried for me Ma. I was always the one there to stand up for her, like: he ought to know better than to go for her now, with me here. Straight, he ought.

Ask the Yeoman of Signals why he frowns when he's alone, and the answer's that his son in the Sussex Light is missing: killed, they reckon, only they ain't sure: good youngster, Les, shaping well, he was—chip off the old block—and I told 'im meself, not a year ago, 'Les,' I says, 'no flippin' Navy for you. Leave that to your dad, and try the bleedin' Army.' Missing . . . riles a man not to know, what with the lad's Mum writing that she's sure he can't be dead—if they thought he was they'd say so: what do *you* think, Perce? What do *I* think? I think there ain't no 'cedlin' God, that's what I think. A man brings his lad up straight and proper, and they won't even let 'im *die*. They keep you 'anging on, and they know as well as I do that he's bought it. So I 'as to conform to their filthy kindness and write back to her and tell her, 'You're right, duck. Don't worry, love. Old Les'll be back.' And I *know*—I tell you I know—and they're taking it out on *me*. And on 'er, too, when I 'as to tell 'er or she cottons on 'erself. (Press it further, and the Yeoman 'd tell you, I'd sooner be dead myself.)

Now ask Captain Muir, D.S.O. and Bar, D.S.C., four times mentioned in despatches—slide into that shelter of his and ask him: 'Have you a thought, apart from this

ship and her company, apart from this Fleet and operation, apart from the Service? Have you anything else to trouble you when you're alone and have time to think? 'Awake', he'd mütter, 'No, damn you!'—but he *has*! Muir never allowed anything outside the Service to worry him—even his leaves he spent in the interests of the Service or of his own place in it: a dozen years ago his wife took Golf as a husband in his stead. But his son went dubiously through Oxford, and is now a conscientious objector, working on the land. Muir has a nagging worry that the lack of his own presence and influence as a father could have had some bearing on the outcome. . . . In any case, Muir doesn't sleep.

Out of the silence under the weather's thunder it starts as a whisper in a telephone.

"'Echo! Red two-four! Range——! Bearing——! —Echo, Red two-five! True bearing, three-three-five'."

Now the whisper in the telephone is a shout in a voice-pipe, now half a dozen voices in their separate jobs and interests all stemming from the one report, moving feet: the telephone buzzes again, insistent, furious.

"Surface echo, three-three-two!"

Messenger banging on the Captain's door, but Muir has heard or sensed alarm: he crashes out of the door and sends the messenger flying as he rushes to the bridge's front. Steele, the Gunnery Officer, scuttles up the ladder into the bridge and fills a 'phone line with his high-pitched efficiency. "Bridge—director!" But Captain Muir's voice beats the weather and the reports.

"Bugler!"

"Sir!" The marine bugler's answer is a delighted

screech. His voice has only just broken, in any case, and can't be trusted on one note. "Sir!"

"Surface action stations. Sound off."

"Aye aye, sir!"

Now the click of the loudspeaker's switching on, its deep, disquieting buzz: the bugle's strident alarm bursts into the sleeping body of the ship. No sleep now: not a single man asleep. And in all the Fleet—the Yeoman of Signals has seen to this without any order—the same alarm is raised, the alarm that was started by a tired sailor raising a thin wedge of light on the dancing ribbon in the window of a radar set. . . .

Peter Tregarth spoke evenly into the mouthpiece of his telephone set. He kept his voice steady with a conscious effort: mustn't show excitement.

"P-one, P-two, with starshell, load, load, load!" •

His own orders bellowed back into his ears as the communication numbers at the two port-side four-inch guns repeated:

"Starshell, load, load, load!"

Peter kept his glasses trained by the repeater ring in the mounting on the bearing which the radar warning had given: he couldn't see anything at all except sea and dark and the two meeting and mingling. He thought: I suppose there must be something there? Even the Director, much higher up, with a clearer, longer view, hadn't found a target. The guns reported:

"P-one, ready! P-two, ready!"

Peter yelled as loudly as he could: "Starshell ready, sir!"

He couldn't imagine that his voice would have carried more than a couple of feet against the roar from

for'ard: but it must have. Muir caught it and Peter heard his order to the Gunnery Officer:

"Open fire, starshell."

Steele's order, "Starshell, *fire*." coincided with the crash of two four-inch guns.

Tregarth had heard Steele's first word only, "Star-shell——" and he hadn't waited for the rest of it. He'd told his guns: "Fire!" Now he spoke aside to the Gunnery Rating who was there to operate the dials and switches in the control-box. "Right six."

"Right six, sir. . . . Set, sir!"

"Fire!"

Again the guns roared and flamed, although the charges were supposed to be flashless.

Aside: "Left twelve."

The setting on the dial in the box threw-off the pointers in the dials which the gunlayers followed: they set their pointers on the setting from the bridge.

"P-one *on*! P-two *on*!"

One voice was Lancashire, the other pure and lovely Scots.

"Fire!"

Now three pairs of starshells were on their way to light up the target, whatever it was, if it was anything at all. All of this had taken about twenty seconds.

Tregarth heard Muir's barked order to Flack: "Make the challenge."

From the port side of the bridge the First Lieutenant chanted back, "Challenge, sir!"

Tregarth could picture those long, thin fingers on the trigger which would flash coloured lights one after the other at the unknown target. A fraction of that light, as it broke in automatic sequence from the mainmast,

flickered like some watered-down November fifth across the wet, grey bridge.

"Challenge made, sir!"

At that moment the first pair of starshells burst, hung lonely in their parachutes above that distant confusion of sea. And Tregarth had the target square in the centre of his glasses.

"Submarine, sir, bearing—Red four-two, moving right to left, sir!"

In his headphones he heard the director-layer's voice: "Director target!"

Guns shouted to the Captain: "Six-inch ready, sir!"

Only one press of one trigger, now, and four turrets of six-inch guns would straddle that pathetically small and frail target with armour-piercing shells. One single hit would be enough to finish her. The gunners stood by, and in the director a thumb was poised an inch above the push of the fire-buzzer. One thumb, lowered an inch. . . . The second pair of starshells broke open to the right, and at that moment a brilliant green flare burst above the submarine's puny, leaping bridge.

The Yeoman yelled hoarsely: "Correct answer, sir! Target's friendly, sir!"

For each watch of every night there was a signal of challenge and a set answer that could be given by Morse or by flare: the flare was a submarine's emergency answer—a thing that could be set off on the periscope standards and lit to blaze while the submarine dived to avoid the unpleasant consequences of being mistaken for an enemy. But this submarine wasn't diving: the savage green light threw a circle of brilliance around its bridge, and it stayed on the surface, now high and clear on a wave's crest, now all but hidden in a trough.

Muir told the Yeoman, grimly: "Identify the stupid bastard."

"Aye aye, sir."

Three A's flickered blue and shaded from the yeoman's Aldis lamp, and straight away a dotted answer from the stranger: the letter 'P' and a number.

- The yeoman yelled into his voice-pipe, to the signal deck.

He had the answer bawled back at him inside a quarter of a minute, and he told Muir: "H.M. Submarine *Slayer*, sir."

Peabody's voice broke in, quiet but carrying in the bridge dark. "Should be thirty miles west, sir, on patrol."

Peabody had the operation and everything in or near it photographically in his accurate navigator's mind.

Muir grunted. He told the Yeoman, "Ask him what in hell he's doing here."

"Aye aye, sir."

Again the rapid winking lights. The answer took longer than the question, and watching it through his glasses, Midshipman Tregarth thought that it couldn't be exactly easy, to flash accurate morse from a thing that size so close to the waves.

The Yeoman called the answer, word by word:

DAMAGED BY—DEPTHCHARGING—UNABLE—DIVE—  
PORT—ENGINE—USELESS—STOP—BATTERIES—CRACKED  
STOP—W/T—INOPERATIVE—STOP—MAKING—FOUR—  
KNOTS—ALEXANDRIA—STOP—REGRET—INCONVENIENCE

The lamp flickered out, and the flare faded too.

The Yeoman reported to his Captain: "That's all, sir."

For a few moments Muir forgot even to grunt. Then he told the Yeoman: "Pass that on to the Admiral. . . . Descourt—fall out action stations." He paused, then shouted to the Yeoman again: "Yeoman!"

"Sir?"

"Come here."

Quietly, so that no other on the bridge would know that he could show such consideration, Captain Muir told the Yeoman of Signals: "Cut out that 'regret inconvenience'. Take it off the pad, and pass the message on without it. All right?"

"Aye aye, sir."

Muir had thought: The fellow's young, and rash. He'll regret those words now, that childish sarcasm: he won't do it again, and I won't pass it on. When we're back in Alexandria I'll have the boy over for a glass of gin, and I'll give him an awkward five minutes. That's all it needs.

Flack was happy! An hour of his watch had passed during the encounter with the submarine; he would have been awake then, anyway—summoned by that awful bugle—so now he felt that as a result of the interruption he had actually gained an hour's sleep. It didn't matter that in the next couple of days he'd have very little sleep at all: tonight he was one-up on the other watch-keeping officers.

Silently jubilant in the dark, he called to the Midshipman-of-the-Watch: "Time for cocoa, isn't it? See what the galley's doing, Mid."

He bent to the voice pipe to order an increase of two revolutions per minute, and, hearing the clanging telegraph from the steering position, he nodded to

himself as he wiped the sea-dew from the front lenses of his binoculars. Wind and sea had shifted round to port, to the bow, increasing the roll: yet without its force from right ahead, the bridge was more comfortable, in spite of the greater sideways motion. Flack told himself: Only another hour and three-quarters; then I can turn in. He could see, in his mind, the bunk ready for him, that quiet seclusion. Only a couple of hours.

Midshipman Tregarth came for'ard.

Flack told him: "Not up yet, Tregarth. Must be some delay down there."

"Sir?"

"Weren't you looking for cocoa, eh?" Even the dark couldn't hide the spread of white teeth when Flack grinned. Those long ones in front took the light as though they had a coating of phosphorus. "Eh?"

"No, sir. . . . Actually I wasn't. Wanted the wind figures, for starshell. It's dropped a bit, sir, hasn't it?"

"Hah!" (Not a happy 'Hah': more of disappointment. You could talk to a midshipman about cocoa for almost any length of time—when he wanted a set of figures, all you could give him were the blasted figures.)

"No, Tregarth. Might think so, but no. The wind hasn't dropped at all: it's gone round a couple of points, that's all. Call it west by north, eh? Force six."

"West by north, force six. Aye, aye."

Tregarth turned away.

"Tregarth!"

"Sir?"

"Odd, our military passenger having the same name as you. You *certain* he's not a cousin of yours?"



"Quite certain, sir." He was telling the truth. "I know all my cousins."

Flack raised his glasses, peering over the front of the bridge, in the centre where one glass pane had been lowered in its grooved slide. No blue light . . . ah, *there!* Check the bearing—eh? Nearly ten degrees off course! Well, no wonder . . .! Flack bent again to the voice-pipe.

"Watch your steering, Quartermaster!"

"Aye, sir."

"Course now?"

"Three five —six, sir!"

Flack glanced quickly at the bridge repeater. It seemed to tally.

He told the Quartermaster: "Steer oh-oh-two."

"Steer oh-oh-two, sir. . . . Course, sir, oh-oh-two!"

"Very good."

When *Pelorus* struck the flagship's wake again, he'd bring her back to the set course. But in the meantime the ships astern would have been keeping their station on *Pelorus*, and the next few minutes would see a fleet that wriggled like a snake, straightening itself out. Flack told himself: I must think about what I'm doing. Not waste time answering silly questions from the gun-room. He told himself: Only another hour and a half. That's all.

*Pelorus* had a sort of limp to her, with the wind and sea on her bow, a sort of stagger that was more lurch than roll. Flack realised, watching a big sea break powerfully over the port side of the fo'c'sle, that when they met the convoy tomorrow morning and turned west, towards Malta, they'd be heading right into the wind again. Not that it hurt *Pelorus*, but it could slow

the merchantmen. One ship slowed would be the whole, convoy's schedule thrown out of gear. A few more hours in the Stukas' reach.

The crash of guns hadn't woken Simon Tregarth, down there in the steel box they'd given him to sleep in. It was all but sound-proof, and his doze, while it was certainly not sleep, was heavy, like the after-effect of drugs: the drug had been the keeping-up of a front, the outward appearance of stability and manhood. Now in place of sleep came the effort's aftermath: the restless agony of tied emotion. He dozed, and if the guns had woken him he'd have been grateful for the relief from this, which was voices and faces and his son not knowing him—a time when he'd taken the boy to a fair, and at the boy's urgent request (how long ago!) they'd ridden down together on a mat around a wooden construction known as the Spiral Tower. From that they'd gone on to the switchback, and the child had taken one of Simon's hands in both of his and yelled with delight at the speed and the awful giddy movement which, to the man, brought no sensation other than that of nausea. Perhaps now, in this half-sleep, the connexion was movement, nausea—both. Simon struggled against it, to change the subject, to project his mind (had to own it first, to tether it and tame it to normality!) either into the real peace of sleep or into wakeful sense—channels of his own choosing. The effort failed; it was the rising to a peak and the moment of suspension, inertia: the fall into that sickening, rushing dive, and the boy's hands tightening like two small vices on his own left hand, which he'd kept there beside him, between the two of them, in case the boy should need it. Simon was

holding on with his right hand to the chromium-plated bar that ran around the chariot above the seat's top: his feet were braced hard against the thing's front, and that left hand of his was there for the boy to hold. To be grabbed and gripped and twisted.

Only now it was being ignored! As the downwards rush changed sickeningly, a swoop of relentless changed direction towards the next peak, with its even worse moment that was almost a pause, a hanging standstill—that left hand of his lay on its own, and no smaller fingers grasped his for their comfort. His hand rested there unused, lifeless, as though it were someone else's hand, and it had no feel in it—only a sort of ache. Then he realised through all the sensation of unreality that while this was indeed unreal, more than half a dream, it was true: the hand that he gave for a child's comfort needed the child's acceptance of it for its own health. The motive and the urge were reciprocal—neither gave or took more comfort than the other. Awake now, thinking almost clearly, Simon looked at his hand lying there open and limp on the edge of the low bed, his other hand grasping hard, white-knuckled, at the right-side bar; he looked at his left hand, which had stayed open and available and waiting all through the nightmare, and he recognised for the first time its appalling emptiness: it ached as though it was suffering from frostbite or from overwork, but it suffered from nothing except that it was empty; and, because a small boy had once seized it in both of his, its emptiness now was pain enough for thought and memory to add themselves and find a total calculable as agony. Now new movement speeding down, and another check before the upward flinging to a new crest; he took abrupt possession of the

hand, so that the fist clenched with an effort of thought; he cried, 'Helen!' At the top of the swoop he grappled with her image, her meaning; he flung himself into the body and heart of her, and he forced into his nostrils the sweet smell of her skin and the way her teeth tasted; he remembered some of the smaller things she'd said: out of nausea and terror and out of nothing he recaptured her—she was with him for the moment, and his arms weren't empty, both of his hands could feel: his ears were full of the hard rhythm of her breath: once again her movements and softness a bewilderment of brittle, sinuous delight.

Yet, when he looked again, that left hand was still empty: none of his thinking had filled it for more than a second, or stopped the way it ached. He told himself again, more loudly, struggling for her: Helen! Again he remembered and heard and felt all the loveliest of the lovely moments, and in the small of his back her hands, 'soft, like pigeons fluttering, in his ear her voice: he told himself, battering at his memory: *This*, this is Helen, and I have her in my heart—the way she looks, and feels—and all of her is mine; the rest of everything is nothing to the possession of her. Nothing!

But from the effort he was now awake, and aware that he had achieved the act of memory by a conscious and deliberate effort. Like a man who is frightened of the ungodly, yet does not believe in God and, without spontaneity, without belief, falls on his knees and says: I love You, be with me; I need You because I have nothing else to call to. The memory and the act of imagery had come not of its own accord, but by his own active willing of it as an antidote to the other. He was quite awake now: aware of being awake and of

the loud movement all around him—that dreadful rise and hang and the long thrust down. His mouth was watering and there was a stiffness in his lower jaw, inside it: he knew, suddenly, that he was going to be sick. A roll to 'port helped him out of the blankets quicker even than he'd intended; he groped blindly, frantically, to the doorway's dim, curved light, and as he stubbed the bones of his naked foot against the edge of the low steel sill, as the pain shot up his shin, the sickness from his stomach came as well: he was alone in the dark, and sick. He held the edge of the door's cold rim to steady his trembling body against the cruiser's savage roll; he faced the inner and outer dark—the outer which was darkness and physical sickness, and the inner which was a knowledge that in pursuit of what he'd seen as perfection he had thrown away and trodden down all the happiness he could ever have known or approached. And when, a few minutes later, he lay face downwards on the bed and cold with the damp sweat of sickness, he tried again to summon the image of Helen, it was not even surprising to him that now, for the first time, he could not find her. Not a trace of her. The only close thing was that knowledge of his own loneliness, of his own inadequacy to the state of being, now, entirely and absolutely alone. Wanting nothing but the things he'd discarded in his search for something better.

## *Chapter 8*

DAWN came up to flush the Holy Land with habitual warmth: it came up over that land called Holy where holiness itself had been hoisted to slow and painful death, and where, not many moons ahead, new murders would be brazenly committed and go rewarded to perpetuate an ancient shame. Dawn reached westwards, touched the leaping sea with silver and with dirty grey; he pinked the flying cloud and raised a forefinger as a warning of the danger in the light he heralded. How many centuries ago might some aware Kháyyam have cried, 'Dawn and all danger stands waiting in the East'!

\* Yet, for the convoy and the Fleet, the immediate danger lay in the west. From the starboard beam came that lightening in the sky, grey polish on the sea, an easing of the blackness overhead. Radar had the convoy on its screen, and the director had reported it in view. Peter Tregarth, from his seat behind the port air-defence sight, could see nothing yet: without listening he heard snatches of reports and orders exchanged across the bridge's for'ard end. Since he'd been relieved from the middle, Peter'd had an hour's sleep: if it could be called sleep. He and the other air-defence midshipman had bunks inside the circular steel structure which was the base of the director tower. It was a noisy place for sleep: it housed the business end of the loud-speaker system, and to sleep in it a man had really to be tired.

Or deaf. It was open on one side to the weather, through its doorless entrance, and to changing watches: the bridge personnel's ration of cocoa, when it came up from the galley every couple of hours, was housed there, and slopped out by the bridge messengers into enamel mugs. Something like sleeping in a tube station, which was what half the population of London had done for some years past. But it was close to their stations for action—as close as Captain Muir's hut was—and since the air defence was a department that needed to be closer at hand than any other—close enough to match the striking speed of aircraft and a not-always efficient Radar warning—this was the best place for them.

And Peter had slept. True, in his sleep he'd heard some anonymous sailors' opinions of their officers, he'd heard the cocoa issue once, and at the same time a particularly nasty story which the marine bugler had retailed to the Captain's servant, he'd heard all the changing courses: but through all of it, conscious of it, he'd slept. Now he sat in the broad swivelled seat behind his sight, and he wished that he'd spent that hour awake. When he'd turned in, at four-thirty, he'd been feeling fit, cheerful. A bit tired perhaps, a little bored, but nothing worse than that. Now, as he faced that greying sea, there was a stink in his mouth, his eyes had springs that tried to close them and at the back of his head was a dullness like that of hangover.

Not that these things affected his spirits. Basically he was knowing that this was the start of the thing, the meeting with the convoy: this was what he'd come to sea for. Only he wished he'd spent that hour smoking in the charthouse, instead of sleeping: he would have liked, now, to be feeling better. He had his belt tightened

by a couple of notches to hold his stomach against seasickness, he'd eaten enough dry Admiralty biscuits to counteract the cocoa that he'd drunk during his watch. He only wished he'd stayed awake.

The convoy was a bunch of blurred dots in the circle of his glasses. To the left a scattered group, two close together and another nearer, one smaller to the right: they'd be the screen of Hunt class destroyers, the left wing and centre of the screen. Closer to the bow was a knot of something bigger: all one at first; but now, from time to time as he forced his eyes, with the lenses' help, against that deep blur of dark and sea, he saw gaps between them, and with the minutes passing as the light grew and strengthened, he saw the separate shapes of ships. From for'ard he heard the clack of an Aldis signal lamp, and for a moment, as *Pelorus* swung away to starboard, the flagship's stern and upper works loomed huge and close ahead. Then the ship spun back to her course, the Quartermaster fighting wind and sea, altering, and all there was in sight from here were two of the convoy's escorts, recognisable as Hunts, climbing the huge waves and plunging their bows into the troughs, buried in sea and foam like ships in some Gaumont British news-reel. Tregarth heard the Yeoman report to Captain Muir:

"From Flag, sir: take up convoy stations in accordance with previous orders."

"Acknowledge."

"Aye aye, sir."

The Aldis clattering again, and now they were close to the convoy, which had drawn ahead across the Fleet's line of advance. The Fleet destroyers, which had been escorting the cruisers, had already been deployed,



to their positions on the convoy's outer screen: thrashing the grey sea with foam, half of them were racing out to port, and the rest ahead of the cruisers to circle the convoy's rear and close up into their stations on its star-board bow. Already that advanced screen was in an embryo formation.

The Yeoman called: "Executive, sir!"

"Very good. Pilot—revs for twenty-five knots."

"Aye aye, sir."

Peabody had been waiting for the order. He yelled into his voice-pipe for the increased revolutions, and as all of them heard the clanging bell and felt from their feet upwards that sudden thrust of greater speed, they saw the flagship swing hard-a-port. Muir watched her turn; he left *Pelorus* on her course so that they crossed the foam where the Admiral had turned, raced on across the convoy's stern.

Tregarth, from his sight, examined the convoy: four ships. Four—and, cruisers, Fleets, Hunts, mental arithmetic before breakfast—twenty warships for their escort! The sight of the Fleet forming filled him with an emotion which he could not exactly place or analyse: those four plodding ships, the swift and purposeful protection forming round them. Perhaps it was that impression of hard purpose, of necessity, determination: the idea imparted of those cargoes' worth to the small island for which they were intended: perhaps it was the very smoothness and efficiency of the Fleet's deployment. No—the emotion had a straight connexion with that core of merchantmen, the centre of that fixed, organised and armed intent.

Suddenly he saw it. Those cargo-ships, they were the craft that ploughed the sea year after year under their

'countries' flags in time of peace; they were manned by the men nobody heard of, they served in peace and war, and only the wives of their men knew much of them. Here and now they were worth twenty warships to an island's life or death. And, around them, these grey shadows in the rising light of day were the ships that had loafed around their buoys in Alexandria and Port Said: this, for them, was their purpose and their life. Now merged into one, the four and the twenty made a solid, fighting unit, formed, advancing. Tregarth thought: This is what I came to sea for!

Muir's order to the wheelhouse brought an end to his thoughts.

"Port fifteen."

The cruiser next astern of them had altered away to port a minute earlier: she'd sheered away into the flagship's wake to close up on the port side of the convoy. Now *Pelorus* had passed astern of the two columns of merchant ships; she in her turn heeled over in a turn to bring her up on their starboard side: the fourth cruiser followed her round to complete the square on each corner of the convoy's box formation. The flagship had reduced speed soon after her turn to port, and now Muir watched her progress carefully so as to fall gently into station abeam of her and on the convoy's other bow.

Five minutes later the convoy was formed. In its centre, the four merchantmen; two British in the port column, and an American leading a Norwegian in the other. The British ships were: leading, the motor-ship *Suffolkshire* of 8,500 tons and eighteen knots, and astern of her the top-heavy *Saxon Queen*, 9,200 and fifteen knots. The American was the *Mormon*, out of Boston, listed as

7,100 deadweight, with a speed of seventeen, and aster of her ploughed the 7,300-ton *Gangerolf*, capable of sixteen knots and with Norway's blue cross standing out straight from her masthead. On each corner of the box of merchantmen lay a cruiser, and around them, close in and taking the sea like hard work, steamed the Hunt class escorts, and outside of them, widely spaced across the convoy's van and down its sides, the outer screen of fleet destroyers.

Way ahead, where all those sharp, high bows were pointing, Malta waited for their coming: for the food and shells, medical supplies, spare parts for guns and Spitfires. Before Malta, on the starboard bow, and two hundred miles away, were the airfields on Crete, where the Stukas waited in line and echelon and their pilots studied their watches and the sky, waiting for the order to take off, to intercept, attack. But the sea, sullen and heaving, was entirely neutral: it didn't give a hang for either side; only whatever they gave it would be accepted—ships and sailors and aeroplanes, they'd all go down the same way.

Now the American was talking to *Pelorus*: from her squat black bridge a lamp flashed, urgently, as though it couldn't wait. She was a full-bellied, wallowing sow of a ship to look at, low in the water and sluggish in her ponderous roll: she bashed into the waves like a bloody-minded hippo crossing a swamp; the Stars and Stripes stood out like a sheet of tin in the wind, and she told *Pelorus* with that winking light:

*"Glad to have you boys along."*

Muir studied the words on the signal-pad, while the Yeoman stood with one eye on his Captain and the other on the flagship. It was a fixation of the Yeoman's,

An ideal of his which he very often achieved, to read the meaning of a string of flags before they had even been properly hoisted. He'd feel insulted and shamed if some other unit of the Fleet should acknowledge a signal before on *Pelorus's* mast the answering pendant was hoisted to the dip, meaning 'Signal observed', and that answering pendant had to be first of all the others in the Fleet to be hoisted close-up, meaning 'Signal understood'.

Muir told him, "Make to the Yanky: Honoured to sail with you."

The Yeoman glanced quickly sideways at the Captain: he had to stop his eyebrows shooting up and 'betraying his surprise. But there was no amusement on Muir's face, no expression at all.

"Honoured to sail with you. Aye aye, sir."

The Yeoman asked himself: What are we—sailors, or bloody ambassadors? (Muir would have told him: Both.) The Yeoman gestured his leading signalman brusquely out of the way, and stepped on to the raised platform behind the big Aldis. He called the American in quick A's until an answering light flashed back from her paint-and-salt-streaked bridge, then he flashed the signal as fast as he knew how, so fast that the leading signalman couldn't read it from the clicks and clashes of the shutter on the lamp: but the Yank could take it, even at the Yeoman's fastest: from across the water the other lamp winked acknowledgement. The Yeoman had been expecting to be asked to repeat, and if he'd been asked to do that he'd have sent it out again so slowly that a Boy Scout could have read it. Mortified, he left the Aldis and reported to the Captain:

"Signal passed, sir."

Muir seemed not to hear. He was staring intently into the starboard director-sight. Guns was at his elbow, another pair of levelled glasses, and Hasty hovered anxiously behind them. Muir grunted, stepped back from the sight.

He asked the A.D.O.: "Well, Hasty. What is it?"

"Dornier 217, sir."

"Sure?"

"Positive, sir."

Muir grunted again. He knew perfectly well that the 'plane out there was a Dornier 217. Not for nothing had he the silhouettes (nose, tail, plan and profile) of every type of enemy aircraft in use in the Mediterranean pasted on the inside of his lavatory door. Every single morning for the last twelve months or more he'd had the bastards' shapes right in front of his nose for at least ten minutes, and he knew them, now, at a glance. He was interested to note that Hasty could also recognise the Dornier and be sure of it. Muir had his private doubts about Hasty. Perhaps it was the way the fellow did his hair, like some blasted actor, that Muir couldn't stand: he thought, now: Probably 'doesn't take enough exercise. I must find out what he does in harbour.

"Yeoman!"

"Sir?"

"Hoist: Enemy aircraft, shadowing. Hasty, give him the bearing."

Hasty told the Yeoman: "Three-five-seven."

The Yeoman yelled into a voice-pipe to the signal deck: "Enemy aircraft shadowing, bearing pendant and flags three, five, seven: hoist!"

And half a minute later the Admiral's answering pendant acknowledged the flag signal that fluttered

from *Pelorus's* swaying mast. That speck in the distance—long and thin, only thicker, heavier in the fuselage when you brought it closer in a pair of binoculars—that small pinhead low on the starboard horizon, was the enemy: his eye, the first sign of him. Muir turned to the Commander.

"We'll remain at the first degree of readiness, Descourt. Action messing."

"Aye aye, sir."

Descourt in his kapok-padded siren-suit stumped belligerently across the bridge and snatched a telephone out of its rack. The exchange didn't answer immediately, and he banged the instrument with his fist. Then: "Commander here: wake up, damn you! Get me the Paymaster Commander."

There was a pause while the exchange put him through and the Commander stood there with the telephone against his ear; he stood waiting and staring angrily at the American on their quarter.

"Pay? We'll be closed up all day. Action messes for breakfast and until further notice. All right?"

The convoy was making only twelve knots into the head sea. The ordered speed, on which the whole schedule of the operation had been planned, was fourteen. If the weather stayed as it was now, they'd lose fifty miles in the next twenty-four hours. Fifty miles at twelve knots—four extra hours outside the range of the Malta Spitfires. Muir raised his glasses, saw that the Dornier was still there, the enemy's eye peeping at them over the far and crinkled horizon. Under his breath the Captain murmured a filthy word: it was addressed as much to the weather as to the shadower. He looked up at the sky, at its thin, racing cloud, useful cover and

camouflage for bombers, and not enough of it to hamper their view of the sea.

He shouted: "Hasty!"

The A.D.O. hurried for'ard from the plotting table.

"Yes, sir?"

"Keep those look-outs of yours up to scratch, Hasty."

"Aye aye, sir!"

Way out to starboard, the Dornier still limped to and fro along the horizon's edge.

Peter Tregarth held the incoming 'plane in the centre of his glasses and studied it as though it was some insect held on the slide under a microscope. Even at this distance the shape of it was familiar and easily recognisable—a Junkers 88. *Pelorus* had seen a lot of them in the last couple of years. Now this one, all alone in a strip of bare sky, came in steadily. It showed no sign of haste or urgency: the only indication of its closing was the heightening angle of sight as it rose against the sky. It could be any ordinary aeroplane crossing the Mediterranean; there was no sign or suggestion of hostile intent or of tight fear in its pilot's stomach. It was alone and detached, and while Tregarth watched it growing and coming in across the convoy's bow, the idea held him that it had no connexion with the convoy: it'd pass overhead on its way from A to B, and from here you could imagine that it wasn't even looking at the sea.

But now one of the destroyers out on the convoy's port wing had opened fire with her for'ard four-sevens: you saw the smoke first from her fo'c'sle, and the crack of the gun followed just behind the sight of the smoke. She fired again, and now, below and short of the black twin-engined bomber, the shell-bursts opened in pairs

like tight black fists that stood for a moment hard against the sky, then faded futile into streamers wasted on the wind: the dull 'clap' of their bursting came late, like confirmation copies of telegrams. The 'plane was still coming in, and several other destroyers had opened fire from the outer screen, and the Hunts had joined in too: the flagship's port-side four-inch added to the din and to the forest of shellbursts around and under and ahead of the 88, which was much closer, so that now you could see that it was moving in fast—not just growing and darkening, but streaking in dead straight, and through the barrage towards the convoy's centre. The plane kept absolutely steady on its course, and made no effort to dodge the flak: perhaps the pilot felt that even if he tried to dodge he might just as likely run into one of the scattered bursts: as well to stay on his run-in and do the best he could with his stick of high explosive. *Pelorus* had put her four-inch into the fight now, and between their sharp, deafening explosions Tregarth heard from farther aft the steady, almost genial pumping voices of the pom-poms: the Junkers was almost overhead now, and the stick of bombs fell away gently and smoothly one after the other as though they were Christmas hampers or packets of leaflets and all of this just a game—harmless sport; wait for the half-time whistle. Peter watched them as they fell and separated, and he couldn't see them any more: from over on the other side of the ship someone—a look-out?—cheered, though what in hell for, Tregarth didn't know or care; he saw the first splash spring up outside a Hunt on the port bow, and before it had fallen the second bomb raised a tower of water close under the flagship's stern. The Junkers had passed over now, out of sight from this



side of the cruiser's superstructure, but twisting his seat round to the left, Tregarth saw the third bomb drop smack in the centre of the convoy's square. Between the four ships, right in the middle, and as harmless as a Christmas cracker. He saw nothing of the fourth, which must have fallen somewhere on their starboard quarter. But its falling raised no comment or excitement from the parts of the bridge from which it would have been visible, so, like the others, it must have fallen into empty sea. Now, with the sudden silence of guns no longer firing (save shells for an enemy attacking, not waste them on his tail), there was a sense of anticlimax in the minds between the deadened ear-drums. Muir, watching through his glasses, told Peabody in a voice which was a shout because after the din he still couldn't hear his own voice at a normal pitch:

"You're right, Pilot. Got him in that starboard engine."

All right, so they'd hit the Junkers with one of a hundred shell-bursts—the German had black smoke pouring out of one engine—but this was no time to gloat over it, because suddenly all hell was breaking out astern. Five more Junkers had appeared there out of the rolled cloudbank into the stretch of blue, with white slicks of cloud moving against them, and every gun in the Fleet was firing on its aftermost bearing—everything from four-sevens to point-fives filling the sky with fear and with hate: Tregarth had one of those insects flattened in his sight, fine from the port quarter; he flicked the switch over and told the director: "ADO's sight port, target! Junkers 88, closing."

"Director target!"

He couldn't see that plane, except now and then for

"seconds—black shell-bursts smothered it, and he pushed the switch back and started looking for another: his job was to find them, not watch what happened afterwards. A lot of sea fell like heavy rain across the bridge, and he knew that *Pelorus* had been near-missed. Now a new one broader on the quarter coming out of cloud. Again he got his sight on it and the director took it over, but before *Pelorus*'s guns could open on the new target some other ship crumpled one of its wings and dropped it in an ugly spiral to the sea. Tregarth heard in his ear-phones the director shifting target to something on the starboard side. He took his eyes away from the glasses and saw that the sky was full of shell-bursts—nothing else but black puffs drifting into grey. He strained his eyes at the cracks in the changing cloud, and suddenly, too late for anything but a glimpse of it, he saw another 88 streaking across a thin strip of happy blue: even as he pushed his switch across and reported the fresh target, he saw the bombs fall away, and on the cruiser's bridge over the mixed and thunderous pound of guns every man heard the first of the stick clear and plain enough to be sure it was for them: all they could do was wait for it while they turned their glasses and their concentration to a search for new attacks developing from astern, and the bomb fell and burst submerged a dozen yards clear of the quarterdeck on its port side. Its bursting shook *Pelorus* as a hard strike of the stick clangs a gong for dinner. In the engine-room stokers and artificers were thrown off their feet across the steel deck, and over the boiler-room a young engineer Sub-Lieutenant was thrown off a ladder and broke his neck on a grating twenty feet below. The second of that last stick of bombs hit the leading Hunt-class destroyer, off on the port bow

of *Pelorus*: it smashed down into her boiler-room and burst down there in her belly, where it hurt, and two minutes later, when the sky was clear and the hot, smoking guns received the order "Check, check, check," it was as though that Hunt had never been. Only a haze of smoke and two other Hunts circling astern, looking for survivors. But it had happened too quickly for any of her men to have escaped, except perhaps by chance. It was just that she'd been with them, part of the Fleet, a section of the entity, and now she didn't exist. At home the telegrams would go out to next-of-kin.

The convoy moved on, towards Malta. Empty shell-cases were stacked out of the way of the guns, and ammunition parties came up to refill ready-use stowages. The two Hunts crept up again from astern, back into the screen: they had no survivors, the senior of them, flew the negative flag, and that inner circle of Hunts was shifted round, spaced out to cover the loss of one—of one ship and one whole ship's company. On *Pelorus's* bridge, the Engineer Commander saluted Muir.

Muir had his eyes on the chart. He turned, and asked the Engineer: "Well?"

"Near-miss started the port fuel tanks, sir. Can't say how much yet, but we're losing."

Muir took the news without any sign of consternation. He told the Chief: "Carry on. Keep me informed."

"Aye aye, sir." The Engineer Commander saluted, turned to leave. He hesitated. "Sir."

"Eh?"

"Young Faulks, sir. It knocked him off the ladder, and he broke his neck. Hit the grating."

The Engineer Commander told Muir: "I had him taken up to the sick-bay."

Muir nodded—slowly. A minute ago he'd seen a whole ship, and all her men go up in one puff: it'd been too quick, too absolute in its sudden happening, to be anything but war, a ship, part of a convoy. He'd thought, not consciously recognising the thought: Well, might have been more than one—might have been part of the convoy itself. The convoy's still intact. In dedication to his job there was only one object: to get those four ships into the harbour of Valetta. To get the food and guns and ammunition they carried into the strength and defence and staying-power of Malta. Yet now, while in the sense of his purpose—of the Fleet's purpose—that one lost ship was an escort gone and a small card trumped, the death of a single man in *Pelorus* herself was the death of a man. He remembered Faulks: last time he'd seen the youngster, at Sunday Divisions, he'd told him to get his hair cut.

Muir told the Engineer: "Sorry, Chief. Carry on, please."

Muir waited a full minute before he crossed over to the port wing of the bridge and trained his glasses aft on the sea that skidded rolling from their port quarter. Peter Tregarth looked, too, knowing that there had to be some reason for the interest, and he saw that broad shine of blue-brown oil spreading out astern.

Muir trained his glasses to the beam, and up, not wanting to draw attention to the damage, which might in any case amount to very little. He came back into the centre of the bridge and asked the Commander: "What in hell's Pay doing with our breakfast? Eh?" The Yeoman of Signals was fidgeting at his elbow. "Well?"

The Yeoman handed him a sheet off the signal-pad.

"From the American, sir."

Muir read: *Sorry about that last one. Hope the other didn't hurt you.*

Muir looked down at the words that lay on the paper in the Yeoman's high, accurate handwriting. Blue pencil, honest sympathy. Muir thought: They have something, for all their ice-cream sodas. That was the main thing he held against the United States Navy: they drank cold fizzes of milk instead of spirits. No diet for sailors. Chicken and sweetcorn and cream: all the great sea wars had been won on salt beef and bad biscuit and rum. But this fellow sounded human—perhaps their Merchant Navy weren't tied to mineral waters?

After breakfast the sky was clearer, although the wind had lost none of its force and the strength of the sea against them was still enough to keep the convoy's speed down to twelve knots. It was the *Saxon Queen* whose reduced speed was holding them back: but for her they'd be better off by a knot or more. But, like the weakness of a chain is its weakest link, the speed of a convoy is the best speed of its slowest unit.

Although *Pelorus* was still closed up at action stations, men from each part of the ship were dismissed individually for short periods to go below and wash or do what they needed: they came back and others were sent down: they went quickly, gladly, lighting cigarettes and pipes as soon as they were off the bridge, but hurrying because they didn't want to be caught below with lather on their faces, or with trousers round their ankles, when the next alarm came. It could come at any moment, any second: the only certain thing about it was that before long it would come—the alarm and the order in the loudspeakers: "All quarters alert!" The

men who were left on the bridge relaxed in the general movement: they moved across to chat to their friends; to stretch their legs six paces across the bridge and back again; to have a look at the parts of the convoy, which, from their set stations on one or other side of the bridge, they could not see. The midshipman from the starboard side climbed out of his seat, stretched, moved aft around the back of the bridge superstructure and paused beside Tregarth, who, still in his place, was studying the destroyers in the outer screen.

"Morning, Peter."

"Eh? Oh, morning. Wonder when we'll get a decent breakfast. Sandwiches——!" He told the other Snotty: "Port fuel tanks are leaking. That near miss." He pointed aft. "Look."

On the other side of the bridge, Lieutenant Hasty felt relaxed, cheerful. He leant against the side—it was a saying in *Pelorus* that Hasty never stood: he always tagged—casually sweeping the lower sky with his binoculars, he had food and coffee inside him, and his chin was smooth from a new blade. In spite of the ship's motion he hadn't even scratched himself, and that in itself was a small triumph. He wasn't even feeling seasick! He'd been down to the wardroom flat, just after breakfast, opening the watertight doors in front and shutting them behind him as he went, stepping over the sills, and noticing once again that the damage-control parties who lurked below decks took on the appearance of families of moles in silent, uncomfortable and enforced hibernation, sprawled in overalls across the decks and glaring at the passer-by as though at some unwelcome and trespassing termite, bent on untold damage: he'd gone down there, and in the officers'

W.C., which had a blocked outlet and was awash with six inches of dirty water and floating vomit so that it stank, he'd thought for a moment or two that the worst was coming: he'd felt it in his jaw, and he'd got out as quickly as he could; but now, back in the wind and the sunlight, there was not a quiver in his stomach. He leant against the back of the look-out positions and crooned softly. Thinking of a girl he'd picked up in the Monseigneur last Friday evening, he crooned: "One day he'll come along, the man I love. . . ."

A laugh behind him broke savagely into the pleasure of his memories and imagery: it broke in like a sudden gash would have shattered the smoothness of that lazy shave. The laugh was acid, high-pitched: it expressed less humour than malice.

Guns—Lieutenant-Commander Steele—shut off the laugh and asked him: "Think the affection'll be returned, old man?"

Hasty raised his eyebrows, smiled without humour but with excessive and unnatural politeness at the Gunnery Officer. Steele cackled again, and strutted away to tell Peabody what that young pip-squeak had been singing to himself. Steele thought: I'll ask Hasty, later, if his lover's 'come along' yet. I'll have a *lot* of amusement out of this. The very thought of it made him laugh again: he controlled the spasm, and put one hand on the navigator's shoulder. Peabody moved sideways just far enough for the hand to fall off.

"Pilot. D'you know what young Hasty sings to himself?"

Hasty thought: Silly little bounder. Going bald and a voice like a dentist's drill. He turned his thoughts back to the Monseigneur—to the girl he'd met there

with her mother. The two of them—one old and incredibly ugly, the other young and lovely just as much beyond belief—were sitting alone at a table half-way down the room between the bar and the dance-floor: they sat alone close to the left-hand wall (on the left as Hasty looked down at them from the back of the raised, oblong bar) sipping long, thin glasses of crème de Menthe frappé, while half the men in the place watched the daughter and were filled with fear at the mother's presence. The other half of the Monseigneur's patrons were too drunk to notice anything but the level in their glasses. Hasty couldn't stand it any longer: he left the tall stool and circled the edge of the bar and threaded his way through the gaps between the tables. He bowed to the old woman (fat shoulders in a shapeless black dress, a sort of shiny smock, an air of detachment and determined decorum in the *mélée* of the Monseigneur: her little finger, when she drank, was raised like a jammed trafficator against the greenish glow of liquored ice), and asked her if he could have the honour of dancing with her. The band was playing a hot, jittery quickstep, and RAF men without wings were leaping about, several feet clear of their partners. Hasty was sure he was safe—if it had been a waltz he wouldn't have risked it. It was, frankly, a gamble: if the mother danced with him, the girl would be taken off in the time it'd take him to get the old woman to the edge of the floor. But, as he'd expected, the mother declined: Hasty was overcome with chagrin. To the point of embarrassment!

“Madame—of course—please forgive——” It seemed then that an idea struck him for the first time. Out of the blue: “But perhaps M'selle would care to dance?”



M'selle was all for it. She had a figure like one of *Men Only's* 'Ladies out of Uniform', and the way she used it destroyed most of Hasty's polished small-talk. It was after their fourteenth dance and her fifth glass of green ice, just after her mother had gone home and she had begun to run her fingers through the hair at the back of his neck while they were dancing, that she told him in the utmost confidence that she was the Duchess of Milford Haven. Incognito. Perhaps Hasty couldn't help his eyebrows going up a little, but she found it suitable to add that she had been exposing herself rather too much on the *plage*; she had acquired a sun-tan which was perhaps too heavy to be becoming to her naturally fair complexion. '

She told him, pulling at his right ear with two long, scarlet fingernails: "I am the same all over."

Hasty gulped, blood or love pounded in his pulses, and he trod heavily on her foot. Later he found that she didn't live with her mother.

He was settling in to think about the rest of it when the look-out down there in the after bay, under his nose, jerked bolt upright and seemed for a moment to be choking: then his left arm flung out wildly, pointing towards the starboard bow, and he yelled in an enthusiasm or excitement quite unusual to any look-out:

"Aircraft, Green four-oh, 'undreds of 'em!"

That startled shout broke like cold water over Hasty's recollections of the fulfilment of his wildest and most pornographic dreams. His glasses were out of focus, and while he fiddled frantically to adjust them, he heard the midshipman on the starboard sight report, loudly and clearly:

"ADO's sight starboard, target! Green three-eight,

moving left to right, angle of sight zero, torpedo bombers. About sixty of them."

And at the same time, at the moment when Muir and Guns and Peabody and Descourt and the Yeoman of Signals and the Captain's servant were rushing to the bridge's starboard side and focusing their glasses on the mass of aircraft to the north-east, the masthead look-out in his crow's nest bent to the voice-pipe and hailed the bridge.

"Masthead, bridge!"

Guns leapt across to the wide copper-bronze ear of the voice-pipe.

"Bridge!"

"Smoke on the port bow. Red two-six, sir."

## Chapter 9

HASTY had his glasses set now: for a moment the sight of that armada of enemy 'planes, low on the horizon and stretching over nearly twenty degrees of sight, dulled his wits and held him speechless.

Muir shouted: "Well? Well, Hasty? What *are* they?"

Hasty hadn't given a thought, yet, to identifying them. Shocked at their very number, visualising a massed torpedo attack on this convoy which had no air cover, no fighter protection, he had simply been goggling at the enemy through his glasses. Now the Captain's angry bellow shook his confused thoughts into formation, and he studied the leading 'plane. It wasn't a torpedo bomber: it was a troop-carrier, a Junkers 52. And the others were all the same.

"Junkers 52's, sir—troop-carriers."

Muir snorted.

"Exactly. Junkers 52's have bugger-all to do with torpedoes, Hasty. It is your responsibility to see that the midshipmen on those sights know the more obvious differences between one aeroplane and another. And if they make a mistake, Hasty, it is your job to correct it—immediately!"

"Yes, sir."

Hasty, his face twitching with embarrassment, waited for another broadside, but the Captain had already transferred his attention to Lieutenant-Commander Steele.

"Guns. Ask the masthead look-out if he's sure that's

smoke." Muir glanced sideways at Hasty, who was on his way aft intent on shattering with carefully restrained venom the midshipman whose error had led him, Hasty, to a dressing-down in front of the entire bridge staff, and he added, "Smoke, and not a cloud or a couple of bloody seagulls."

Guns called into the voice-pipe: "Bridge, masthead!" "Masthead?"

"Are you certain it's smoke, Hardcastle?"

"Pos'tive, sir. Black an' 'eavy. Bearing now, red two-four."

If the look-out's observations had been correct, the bearing was drawing for'ard, which meant that whatever was making that smoke was steering a course to cross the convoy's bow.

Muir asked Flack: "What's the true bearing for red two-four?"

Flack sprang forward, and peered into the glass face of the gyro repeater.

"Two-five-oh, sir."

"Yeoman!"

"Sir?"

"Hoist—*smoke bearing two-two-five.*"

"Aye aye, sir."

The Yeoman turned away to the voice-pipe, but even as he bent to it, that weather eye of his caught the flash of distant colour as a string of flags ran up to the Admiral's starboard yard-arm: the Yeoman straightened from the voice-pipe, and levelled his binoculars at the signal. He called: "From the flagship, sir: *Smoke bearing two-four-six.*"

So the Admiral had got in first.

The Yeoman told the signal-deck, through the voice-

pipe, "Answering pendant, close-up, hoist!" At least, *Pelorus* would be first to acknowledge the signal.

But now a new set of flags streamed from the flagship's halyards, and the Yeoman, without bothering to raise his glasses, could see that the string of flags were topped with pendants which named *Pelorus*.

"Signal to us, sir."

He grabbed the signal book, beckoned to the leading signalman: he flung the book into the younger man's hands, then raised his glasses and read out the flags. The leading signalman wrote the signal down on his pad in huge, blue letters.

It read:

"*Pelorus* take *Mistral* and *Monsoon*, proceed independently investigate bearing two-four-six."

*Mistral* and *Monsoon* were the fleet destroyers on each wing of the extended screen.

Muir nodded. He handed the signal to Peabody, who checked the time and made a note in the rough log. Then he crossed over to the other side of the bridge to warn the Instructor Lieutenant, who, one deck down, was working the plot.

"Yeoman."

"Sir?" It was remarkable how the Yeoman could look at his Captain and at the same time never take his eyes off the flagship. "Sir?"

"To *Mistral* and *Monsoon*: Take station ahead of me, course two-five-oh, twenty-five knots. Have that bent on ready, Yeoman."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Flack: warn the engine-room that I'll be increasing to full speed shortly."

“Aye aye, sir.”

To Peter Tregarth, all this activity on the front of the bridge meant nothing. Against the wind he couldn't hear a word that anyone said: he knew it had all been started by that report of smoke—he'd heard that, but from where he sat it was quite impossible to tell what action was being taken, what the signals were about. Perhaps somebody knew what the smoke was; perhaps none of them had the slightest idea; perhaps it was of as little consequence to the convoy as those German troop-carrying aircraft had been. When in his earphones Peter had heard that report, *Torpedo bombers, about sixty of them*, he'd felt the muscles in his stomach contract and he'd thought: We've had it; this is *it*! It was much the same as being told: *The convoy will now sail over the edge of the world*. Then, when the menace had turned out to be nothing more dangerous than a formation of lumbering transports, he'd thought, quietly and without any sensation of relief or gladness: Of course, they haven't *got* as many as sixty torpedo bombers—not here. Should have thought of that. All the same; it was strange to pass in the open sea a fleet of aircraft full of troops on their way to bolster the enemy front line in the desert: you could picture them, the Jerries, sitting stiffly in silent, disciplined lines of packs and rifles and steel helmets between the circular corrugated walls of the Junkers' cabins: perhaps one or two of them looked out of a window and saw the convoy in the distance, possibly not even knowing that the ships were British—the two convoys, one air- and one sea-borne, passing each other like tides of people passing in a wide street. The Junkers had taken care to stay out of range of the Fleet's guns, though: they'd left their southerly course

and they'd been circling round eastwards when they'd been spotted, and no doubt their pilots would have had anxious eyes on the sky, in case the British convoy might have had an escort of fighters. A single fighter, given ten minutes' glorious freedom, could have put paid to many of the slow, defenceless transports, dropped hundreds of Wehrmacht stalwarts, fully equipped and adequately weighted, into that grey-white floor of sea.

Now those flags fluttered down from the Admiral's yard-arm, and a moment later Peter realised that *Pelorus* was forging ahead out of her station on the convoy's bow, flinging herself ahead into the toppling crests of waves, thrusting herself up the rising slopes and through the breaking sea, across the trough beyond, with her stern swinging down and the screws gripping the sea as her bow rose and she drove powerfully with her bulling angled at the racing clouds. Already the merchant ships had been left astern, and, looking back over the quarter, Peter saw the flagship coming round to starboard, presumably to place herself in the centre of the convoy's van so that, in *Pelorus's* absence, the cruiser escort would be a triangle around the square of merchant ships. Now *Pelorus* had overhauled the inner screen, thrust herself forward through the gap between two Hunt-class destroyers. As she passed through, Peter looked down into one escort's swaying, gyrating bridge: they were close enough to see the expressions on the men's faces in that other bridge, a wave of a hand that went unacknowledged from *Pelorus*, except by the marine bugler, who waved back with his tin hat and screamed, shrill and derisive, something about Saturday night in the workhouse. He knew he was safe: the wind took his words like confetti and scattered them astern;

only Peter heard them. Then the Hunts had fallen back, and Peter saw movement from the outer screen—the destroyer which had been on the port wing had moved ahead out of station and was now steering a convergent course at high speed: she'd left her sisters in the A/S screen and she was on her way to join *Pelorus*. Peter realised that they must have been detached to put themselves between the convoy and the smoke: that must have been the order contained in the string of coloured bunting he'd seen arcing from the flagship's halyards.

Now, with seas breaking heavily and continuously over her fo'c'sle, *Pelorus* was passing through the outer screen, and that destroyer from the wing had fallen into station forty-five degrees on the cruiser's port bow, a couple of cables' lengths away: from the number painted on her stern, Peter identified her as *Mistral*, and from the fact that she'd taken station where she had he deduced that two destroyers must have been detached to escort them and that the second would be on their other bow. From here, of course, he couldn't see it. *Mistral* at twenty-five knots, and with the weather fine on her bow, was taking seas green into her bridge twice a minute: compared to the cruiser's motion, which was itself violent enough for acute discomfort, the destroyer's wild and savage plunging was something crazy, too exaggerated to be anything but fantastic: almost as though it was no ship but a living creature fighting the sea, and the sea's attempts to slow its progress, writhing in agony in a trough, then lunging forward and up in a new attack on another huge crest rising and towering ahead against the sky.

Guns told the Captain: "There's the smoke, sir. Right ahead. Still only smoke."



Muir raised his glasses, studied the dark smudge on the horizon.

"Yeoman—make, *Course two-six-oh*. Executive."

"Aye aye, sir."

The masthead look-out's voice broke cheerfully out of the rattling pipe on the bridge's port side.

"Masthead, bridge!" Guns took it.

"Bridge."

"Masts and funnel in sight under the smoke, sir. Looks like a big troopship, sir."

*Pelorus* and her escorting destroyers had come round to starboard now, keeping themselves between the enemy and the advancing convoy, and from his position on the port sight Peter Tregarth had the smoke clearly in his glasses. *Pelorus* was making twenty-seven knots, and at this rate, with the other ship on a convergent course, it wouldn't be many minutes before they came in range. Tregarth was keyed up with excitement and anticipation: it wasn't often, these days, that you got a surface target, something big enough to be worth six-inch salvos or torpedoes. The enemy came mostly in dive-bombers and in submarines, in frogman-suits: the prospect of a big target, now, had every man in *Pelorus* on his toes. They were heartily sick of only defending themselves, keeping themselves afloat against the attacks of aircraft and submarines: now it looked as though there'd be a chance to hit out, for a change, to demonstrate their offensive power. In his earphones Peter heard the Director report contact.

"Director, target! One troopship, about ten thousand tons, bearing two-three-six, range twenty-six thousand, course north."

"Yeoman!"

"Sir!"

"Make to the Admiral by light: enemy troopship, bearing two-three-six, thirteen miles, course north. Closing to engage."

The Yeoman repeated back the words of the message as he stepped happily on to the platform behind the big signal-lamp and trained it on the distant smear of convoy.

Crash of the sea ahead and its pounding on the fo'c'sle, the whole ship trembling to the shrill, rattling violence and the upward thrust as the screws bite in deep and solid water and send her rushing forward: then her bow falling, and as the stern rises, the screws race, shaking the whole ship like a big dog coming out of water and shaking itself:

"Director, bridge!"

"Bridge!"

"Target altering away to port."

"Guns—what's her bearing, now?"

"Two-four-oh, sir."

"Steer two-four-oh, Flack. Yeoman—make to the escort: *Course two-four-oh, working up to maximum revolutions.*"

The enemy had seen them at last. His look-outs couldn't have been up to much, to have waited this long before they opened their eyes. And, by rights, he shouldn't have been here at all. Surely the convoy would have been reported—they'd been shadowed for hours, and attacked, and yet the enemy chose this time to try to run an unescorted transport smack across their course! Well, thought Peabody, deftly marking-off a position on

the chart—well, it makes a nice change. He straightened up from the hooded chart-table, and a fistful of flying spray stung his eyes like the flick of a whip's lash. He saw the soldier, Major Tregarth, standing alone and white-faced, anxious: he stood in the gap between the back of the chart-table and the bridge's corner, by the torpedo sight. Peabody thought: Poor chap looks like he's been seasick for six weeks, scared of it starting again. Peabody knew how utterly demoralising that particular sickness could be: but this was no time for offering sympathy to soldiers.

He told the Captain, "Logging twenty-eight point two, sir."

"Very good." Peabody cleared his throat, and Muir glanced sharply at him. "Huh?"

"Sir—we haven't reported the target turned away yet."

Muir nodded.

"That can wait."

If the Admiral knew that the enemy had turned and that the chase was taking *Pelorus* away to the south, he might—probably would—recall her to the convoy. He'd only detached her in the first place as a safeguard to the convoy, in case the distant smoke held danger to that essential task of getting those four ships through to Malta: *that* was his duty, to protect the convoy, not to go chasing transports or any other type of red herring across the Mediterranean. But Muir, with a worthwhile target in sight, was not inviting a recall.

"Yeoman. To the escort: *Take station in line ahead on my starboard bow*. Executive. Steele—you ready?"

"Aye, sir."

There was no strut, no pomposity left in the Gunnery

Officer. He was off the parade-ground now, and his gunnery mind was purring as smoothly and accurately as one of the hundred machines, which, in different centres of the fire-control system, were set to range, rate, bearing and a mass of other little computations which would have their logical outcome in shells from *Pelorus* straddling and hitting that distant enemy. However savagely the cruiser might roll, pitch, stagger and yaw, her shells would follow the same set path to the target over ten miles of sea.

Peabody stepped round the side of his chart-table and handed Major Tregarth a pair of hollow rubber plugs.

"Ear-plugs, Major. You'll find the six-inch a bit noisy."

The soldier took them dubiously: they were joined together by a length of grey, frayed string, and he wasn't sure that he liked the idea of sticking them in his ears. Still——

"Thanks."

"Feeling all right?"

"Tophole, thanks."

Peabody thought: You don't look it.

"Had some breakfast?"

The Major shook his head.

"They offered me some, but . . ." He grinned without showing much amusement.

"Oh. . . . Well, better wear those plugs." Peabody went back to his chart.

Muir shouted to Steele: "Open fire!"

Peter Tregarth heard the order and braced himself against the shock of the explosion; at the same time he heard the fire-buzzer in his earphones. It was nothing to do with him—only the sound of the buzzer in the

director carried into the telephone system to which his own headset was linked. The for'ard turrets roared and flamed, and there was nothing much but the sound of it, overpowering and penetrating so that his head rang with it: cordite smoke flew back on the wind, and Peter saw Muir rigid like a carved statue on his stool up front, 'Guns' beside him standing on tiptoe with his glasses at his eyes and his elbows jammed against fittings on the wall of the bridge to steady himself against the ship's motion: he was waiting anxiously for the first salvo to fall, for the splashes that would mark their falling. There wasn't long to wait. Peter saw them too—they rose thin and high and then mushroomed at their tops, hung for a moment as if they intended staying there, then they melted down into the waves. They'd been short of the target, but perfectly set for line, and now the Gunnery Control Officer in the director ordered: "Up ladder, shoot!" The for'ard guns crashed again, huge and sharp and furious, again and again, and the wind was full of the reek and dirt of cordite. *Pelorus* was overhauling the enemy rapidly, and since the second salvo her shells had been landing on the target, bursting black-and-orange on that high stern. 'A' and 'B' turrets fired together in steady vicious rhythm. The enemy had stopped now; she lay there sluggishly, heaving to the sea, with shells hitting her all along her length as she paid off to port, out of control or uncontrolled—it came to the same thing—and a dozen fires were blazing on her stern and in her waist. And suddenly, like a wounded bird, the Italian flag came flopping down from her masthead.

Muir raised his left arm and yelled at Steele: "Cease fire!"

Guns screamed into his voice-pipe: "Check, check, check!"

Abruptly the turrets fell silent, but when men spoke to each other they still shouted because their eardrums were deadened and they couldn't hear their own voices.

Muir bellowed to the Yeoman: "International flags, Yeoman. *Abandon ship. Do not use your wireless.*"

A huge white flag—it looked to be a sheet—climbed slowly up the halyards to the burning transport's yard. One of his boats was already in the water, and two others were edging down the side unevenly from their davits. She seemed to have very few men: certainly no troops. But that was to be expected: they were putting troops *in to* the desert, not taking them out. Not yet.

"That signal acknowledged, Yeoman?"

"Reckon that table-cloth's an acknowledgement, sir."

Muir looked at his wristwatch.

"Make to him. *I intend opening fire in ten minutes' time.*"

Muir was anxious to finish the job quickly, before they were recalled or any interference came out of the sky.

"Hasty!"

"Sir?"

"Keep your look-outs on their toes for aircraft."

Dense black smoke was pouring from the enemy's stern, and she seemed to have settled lower in the sea. Muir ordered the speed down to eighteen knots, and as they drew abeam of the enemy and passed him, about four miles clear, the six-inch turrets moved steadily round, following the director, which never left the target. Muir called the Gunnery Officer to him.

"I'm going to turn, Steele, in five minutes' time. Then I want him finished as quickly as possible."

"Aye aye, sir."

Half a dozen boats had pulled clear of the troopship: there was no visible life on her decks, and her bridge, which the flames had now circled, was deserted. Above it the sheet stood out like part of someone's laundry.

Major Tregarth asked Peabody: "Couldn't those chaps be picked up?" He pointed at the boats, ridiculously small on the big waves.

Peabody shook his head.

"Risking a torpedo, to stop. Take a long time, in this sea. But they'll be spotted by their own 'planes—sure to be, before long."

The Major looked down at the sea as though he hated it. He said to Peabody: "Sooner them than me."

It wasn't so much the sea he was hating, but more the memory of his humiliation of the night before. He was revealed to himself as a man without loyalty, without conviction, without anything but fear and weakness and this bitter self-contempt. He knew that he was quite unworthy of Helen and of her trust in him: that all he was fit for was the half-life he had broken with. He thought: Isn't that the root of it? Isn't it all the long years of putting-up with nothing that have done this to me? But he caught himself in the act, with sheer loathing he sneered at his own thought: *Even more excuses, new ones?*

This time the after-turrets, 'X' and 'Y', did the shooting. *Pelorus* passed the blazing transport at a range of less than five miles, hitting with the first salvo. Two more were all that were needed to open an enormous cavity in the Italian's side. She rolled slowly over, flames hissing in the rising waves, then gradually her

stern slipped under and the black smoke billowing up was edged with a haze of steam; she put her stern down faster and water poured in through that hole in her side. She stood for a moment upright, her bow pointing vertically at the low cloud: gently at first, then with a rush, but still smoothly and with a certain grace—an acceptance of the inevitable, not making a fuss about it—she slid down, and down, a deep curtsey to her final curtain; and now there was only sea and waves and troughs and, far away, half a dozen lifeboats climbing and sliding, close together and small in the immensity of their surroundings.

Muir told Steele: "Secure the six-inch. . . . Peabody—what's the course to rejoin?"

"Three-five-five, sir."

"Yeoman. Make to the escort: *Course three-five-five, twenty-five knots*. Executive. Flack, steer three-five-five." Muir swept the horizon with his glasses. "Steele, ask the masthead if he can see the convoy."

Ordinary Seaman Hardcastle answered his voice-pipe.

"Masthead?"

The Gunnery Officer's voice floated out of it, as hollow and lifeless as the pipe itself.

Hardcastle told the pipe, in answer to its question: "Yessir. Five degrees on the starboard bow to right ahead, sir."

"Very good."

Hardcastle braced himself against the back of the circular crow's nest—about the same size as a G.P.O. letter-box, only it was grey instead of red—and scowled at the distant convoy. He thought: *Very Good*. Couldn't they ever use any other answer? You reported a ship in



sight, and they told you: *Very good*. Then you told them: you couldn't see it any more. And still they answered: *Very good*. Be a change, thought Hardcastle, to have a bloke shout *Right you are*, or *Right-oh*, or even, *Okay, Hardcastle!* But not a bit of it: because Nelson or Drake or one of that lot had started the fashion of saying *Very good* to every ruddy thing, whether there was anything good about it or not; nobody'd dared say anything else ever since. Lack of imagination—that was the trouble with the Navy.

Hardcastle angled his glasses this way and that, keeping them level as he swept the great circle of horizon, and the crow's nest swayed and circled and soared in savage arcs above the plunging, rolling cruiser. He didn't find it uncomfortable, now that he'd got used to it, and it was nice to be on his own for a change, instead of jammed elbow to elbow with the other look-outs on the side of the bridge, right slap under the noses of half a dozen officers. There was a certain pleasure, too, in being up here and seeing farther than anyone else in the ship could see. He'd been the first to spot that smoke, and later it'd been his report that had informed Captain Muir, and through him the Admiral himself, that the smoke came from a troopship. Hardcastle thought, smiling: In a way, in a manner of speaking, it's me as put that trooper in the way o' catching the packet it did! Something to tell the wife and kids, that'd be—better than a lot of talk about aeroplanes and periscopes and all that. He ran quickly over the story in his mind. He saw himself in front of the gas fire in their flat over the shop (Cigarettes, Tobaccos and Sweetmeats: J. Hardcastle, Prop.), telling the nippers how he'd sat up there like the man on the blooming

· flying trapeze and watched the guns firing and the shells landing on the other ship and bursting, and later how he'd watched her sink. But he hadn't liked that part of it, much, although it was an *Uyetic*, it was still a fine great ship, and a shame to see her go, just like that, all in a minute. He pictured her now, resting on the bottom, and the mud settling round her and fishes swimming in and out of that hole in her side. It made him feel spooky to think of it: like thinking of a body in a grave and worms in its eyes.

But he had more than *that* to tell the wife! Not that it'd interest *him*—not in the normal way—but he knew it was the sort of thing women liked to chattle about; and she'd be glad to have a bit of news like this to bring out at the right moment. Even now he could imagine her eyes widening and her delighted *Well, I never!* She'd written him four whole pages of airmail a few months back, when the village had got to know how Mr Tregarth had left Mrs Tregarth and wasn't coming back to her: gone with a girl young enough to be his daughter, wrote Mrs Hardcastle (he could tell from the way her writing got larger and larger that she was really very upset by the whole thing), and him, of all people, that wouldn't say 'Boo' to a goose! Not that she blamed him, in a way; she'd always held that Mrs Tregarth didn't ought to treat him the way she did: all the village knew who it was that wore the trousers up at the House! Well, why wouldn't they, with the House full of village girls scrubbing steps and floors and making beds and that, and hearing the way Mrs Tregarth spoke to him notwithstanding it was him that brought back the money and kept a roof over her head! Like some lodger, they said she treated him; and him meek and mild and

never a word to say for himself, and he'd say to that child of theirs, *Do this, Peter*, he'd say, and Mrs Tregarth 'd up and say, *Nothing of the sort*, she'd say. *Leave the boy alone, Simon. What's it got to do with you?* When Hardcastle had that letter from his wife about Mr Tregarth carrying-on with some girl and not coming home for his leave—taken a flat in London, so they said—well, when he'd heard that he'd laughed; he'd thought: Good luck to 'em!—and he'd written to his wife: *Even a worm will turn*. Writing that, he'd grinned to himself, thinking: Take that as a warning, my girl! All the same, when he stuck the envelope down he wrote in capitals right across the back of it, S.W.A.L.K. "Sealed with a Loving Kiss", that stood for. Edie liked to see it there, and once he'd started doing it he had to go on, because if the postmistress found one letter without it, the whole village would be saying in next to no time that there was trouble between Edie and Jack Hardcastle. And nobody wanted *that* sort of talk

Well, now he had news of his own for her: the father and the son here in the same ship and not knowing each other even to speak to! Only last evening, when he'd been on watch in the starboard look-out bay and he'd just turned-over to Ginger Hopkins, he'd reported to the ADO that he'd been relieved and he was going aft for a smoke, when he met that long, thin streak of a bloke—Stringbag, they called him, he was the First Lieutenant—well, this old coot turned chatty, talked about the weather and tomorrow's breakfast and Lord knows what else. Hardcastle didn't want to seem rude, or stupid, and he was used to making a remark of two now and then to a customer, so for want of anything better to say he jerked his head towards Mr Simon.

“Fancy ’aving young Mr Tregarth’s father with us,  
s11 1”

Later old Stringbag came up with him again—caught him in the gangway outside the chartroom, he did, when Hardcastle was going down for a you-know-what, and he’d called out: “Hah! Robbins!”

Hardcastle had turned round, looking behind him to see who the tall man might be talking to, but there was nobody there—only the two of them—and he’d remembered that the First Lieutenant never got a name right, poor old sod.

“Sir?”

“You were wrong, Robbins.” Flack was showing his teeth in one of his widest smiles. “They aren’t related at all. I *thought* it would be rather too much of a coincidence.”

• Hardcastle watched the long, thin legs disappearing up the ladder to the bridge, and he thought: No, they didn’t ought to take it *that* far. Blood’s thicker’n water, I’d say.

## *Chapter 10*

LUNCH was served from the for'ard galley, under a system called 'action messing', which had been worked out recently by Commander Descourt in collaboration with the Paymaster Commander. The whole ship's company was divided into twenty-five action messes, according to their stations about the ship. The bridge personnel and the crew of the director formed one mess, and two of the stand-by look-outs were detailed as 'cooks'. The bugle sounded 'Cooks to the Galley', and the two men went below and queued outside the galley hatch for the rations due to the bridge, which had been labelled Number One Mess. 'Cooks' from other parts of the ship waited in line for their plates of thick sandwiches and the big enamel jugs of soup. Thus the galley became a sort of social centre—a place where news and views and comment from all the different centres of the ship could be exchanged. By the time the empty plates were returned to the galley, the pompoms' crews would know how the Old Man tore Lieutenant Hasty off a strip about not knowing the difference between a bomber and a troop-carrier, and all the bridge staff would know that Leading Stoker Charlie Wilson was on a disciplinary charge for using foul language to a Stoker Petty Officer. It became known that the Canteen Manager had had a row with the Chief Buffer's Mate over a question of allowing credit at the canteen, and that Sub-Lieutenant Yarrow in 'X' turret had never

stopped being sick since he'd started at six o'clock yesterday evening. Able Seaman Nobby Clarke told his friends and acquaintances in the galley queue that it was a proper 'orror—you would n't credit he'd have nothing left to puke, but blimey, the little bugger never left off: flat as a pancake he'd be, by Malta, an' likely we'll 'ave to blow 'im up again with a bicycle pump. Everyone in the queue shook their heads and sucked their teeth in stern disapproval of young Subby Yarrow's frivolous behaviour. Nobby Clarke nodded at them.

"Ah. An' that's not to mention the state o' the floggin' turret. 'Orrible!"

Peter Tregarth sat on the bridge deck with his knees up and his back against the broad column of his Sight. He munched a sandwich, slowly, because he didn't like it much, and watched the struggles of a small yellowish-brown cockroach which had climbed into his soup-cup and was now stuck in the thick dregs at the bottom. Now and then it managed to get a few of its feet clear, but then it jammed them back again when it tried to extricate the others. Peter told it: "Might as well give up, Cocky. Have a good feed, and relax—you're not getting anywhere that way." It reminded him of the old W.A.A.F. saying: *If rape is inevitable, relax and enjoy it.* He thought, knowing something of the habits of cockroaches: Probably it wouldn't mind being raped: might not even notice. What it doesn't like is being drowned in pea-soup. He took a match out of his box and used it to lift the cockroach out of the cup: he set it down on the deck beside him and it scuttled away, leaving at first a thin smear of soup in its wake. That reminded Peter of the oil-leak: he crammed the rest of the sandwich into

his mouth, and climbed into the seat behind his sight, trained the glasses aft and examined the cruiser's wake. Not a sign of oil now. Either the leaking tank was empty, or they'd managed to shut it off. Anyway, he thought, it'll mean a docking when we get back to Alex. Perhaps a day or two's leave to each watch. Not that he'd be able to do much with leave, in his present—and usual—financial condition. It was just about impossible to have a cheap leave, in Alex.

Able Seaman Forster shattered the bridge's after-lunch peace with a sudden, raucous shout: "Bogeys, large formation, Green one-five-oh, twenty miles, closing!"

Hasty dived round the corner from the other side of the bridge: he jammed his tin hat on to his small, round head, and a handful of breadcrumbs fell out of it and rolled down into his eyebrows and over his nose.

He told Forster: "Watch it."

Forster told the mouthpiece of his headset: "Wochit."

The bridge staff moved quickly to their places, a dozen pairs of binoculars were raised and trained on the sky above the starboard quarter. Peter Tregarth, out of it, for the time being because the report didn't come into his sector, began a careful, unhurried sweep of the port side.

Forster yelled: "Bearing now green one-seven-oh, sixteen miles, closing!"

Hasty turned around and looked inquiringly at the Captain.

Muir saw his action, and scowled at him.

He shouted: "Yeoman! Tell the Admiral."

Blast it! he thought, Damn their eyes!

He watched the flags run up over the bridge, and saw the Admiral's immediate acknowledgement: a

moment passed, then a red flag climbed swiftly to the flagship's yardarm.

Muir told the Yeoman: "Hoist red flag."

Every ship in the convoy was doing the same, even the merchantmen. Muir muttered something to Peabody, who hurried aft past Hasty and down the bridge's port side behind Tregarth to the shelter. The loudspeakers began to hum, a bosun's call shrilled briefly and Peabody's voice boomed out into every corner of the ship.

"All quarters alert; enemy aircraft closing from astern. All quarters alert."

The loudspeakers switched off with a click, and Able Seaman Forster yelled: "About nine bogeys right astern twelve miles!"

A second later Peter heard the midshipman on the starboard sight call into the telephone: "ADO's Sight starboard, target! Green one-seven-five, angle of sight three zero, dive bombers."

Hasty's voice: "How many?"

"About six."

Then Peter had a couple, too, close to the stern on the port side. He shoved his switch over and reported: "ADO's Sight port, target! Two Stukas, red one-seven-oh, angle of sight three-five, closing!"

Things were warming up: this was the way it always came—out of nothing in the winking of an eye.

The GCO's voice broke in urgently: "Four-inch with red barrage, load, load, load! Starboard battery follow director, port battery in local control."

The guns reported back in quick succession, *Ready*, and Peter told the portside battery of four-inch: "ADO port, target: follow my pointer."

"P-one target!"—"P-two target!"



Peter switched off: he'd put them on to the first Stukas, now his job was to find others, so that when they were finished with the first lot they could change straight over to the next. Already the cruiser astern of them and several of the Hunt-class destroyers had opened fire, putting up a barrage ahead of the attacking aircraft and over the top of the convoy, in the Stukas' path and below—an umbrella of shrapnel and high explosive which they'd have to fly through and dive into. The Stukas were flying in a sort of wedge, two separate formations, in echelon with the leaders wide apart, an open V without a point at the bottom: the squat, ugly bombers were flying fast through the outer fringe of shell-bursts, almost as though they liked it, as though they were mad or drunk or bent on suicide. *Pelorus* was nothing but a gun platform now; the noise of her guns was solid and continuous: but the Oerlikons and the point-fives were still holding their fire, waiting for the bombers to set themselves down in their dives when they'd be steadier, closer targets for the lighter weapons. And now, as though the two of them were controlled by one pilot, the two leading Stukas, one in each separate flight, flung themselves on their wing-tips, banking inwards and sliding their noses down, rolling into the dive, power-diving steeply, straight into the massed shell-bursts over the convoy's centre. Suddenly from aft came the harsh and penetrating snarl of Oerlikons and the point-fives' angry rattle—the four-inch were firing as fast as their crews could load them and bring them to the ready: through it all at intervals came the pompoms' easy, impersonal klomp-klomp-klomp. The clowns of the party were the pompoms, keeping up that jovial patter. From the merchantmen Bofors were

sending orange, red and yellow tracer soaring to meet the diving 'planes.

A Stuka came to pieces in mid-air, one wing clean off and floating up instead of down, the engine on its own plummeting down like a huge bomb, and the rest all bits drifting and falling like parts of a broken kite. The Stukas came down screaming in pairs, one pair close behind the other, all of them going for the merchantmen at first, but suddenly there was one coming down at *Pelorus* straight as a die, and the cruiser's guns were blazing in its pilot's face, but he didn't seem to be worrying, although you could see a stream of Oerlikon smacking into his port wing and bits of the wing flying off, a flicker of flame along its edge and a trail of smoke: then a four-inch shell burst just under him, between the black wheels of his under-carriage, and it blew the Stuka apart, the bomb exploding too, and Hasty clapped his right hand to his left shoulder and cursed in a high, 'surprised voice. Still there were Stukas over the convoy, and the *Suffolkshire* seemed to be on fire aft.

*Pelorus* rang continuously, like a huge tortured gong, with the guns crashing, and over all of that the sirens on the Stukas' wings shrieked fear at the men behind the guns. Peter Tregarth thought, without consequence: I had one of those things once—it made the same sort of noise, anyway, on my bicycle, at home. He had a new Stuka in his sight, and it was diving over the Yank. He yelled: "ADO port, target!" and the port-side four-inch switched their barrage over. This one dived more steeply than any of the others had done. It stood on its nose just about vertically, and when the shellbursts opened they were already behind its tail: all the Yank's Bofors were pumping at it, but it came straight on,

shrieking like the others—only no bomb yet. It was through the flak, and still it hadn't dropped its bomb—it didn't seem to be pulling out at all. The pilot had left it too late, or something had gone wrong with his controls. At the last minute Peter saw the 'plane jerk, as though something had happened to try to force its nose up, but it was much too late—the Stuka only jerked, and it went straight on and crashed on the Yank's fo'c'sle in a blaze of explosion stunning in its power. On *Pelorus's* bridge they felt the blast as though it came from a dozen yards away, not a mile. Forster whistled, his eyes wide with awe.

Then he grinned, and told Hasty: "Reckon that bloke was out for promotion, sir."

Peter Tregarth saw hoses being rigged on the American's upper deck and led for'ard to play on her wrecked fo'c'sle. His eye was caught by activity on her bridge, and, looking there, he saw a stretcher being lowered on ropes to the deck below. All was quiet, the sky dirty with shell-bursts but empty of Stukas. From below, on the four-inch gun deck, came the clatter of empty shell-cases being collected and stacked clear of the guns. Peter remembered seeing a hit on the *Suffolkshire*, early in the attack. Now he trained his glasses on her, but there was no sign of damage or emergency. He looked around the rest of the fleet, counted the destroyers: they were all there, intact, in station and undamaged. The sea still heaved and the ships ploughed through it, steady and set in their battle with the sea, and as though they hadn't noticed the fracas overhead.

Hasty reported to Captain Muir: "Permission to go below, sir, please."

"Eh? Go below?" Muir stared in vague surprise and disapproval at the ADO. "What the devil for, Hasty?"

The young man pointed awkwardly at his left shoulder: the jacket was torn and a stain of blood was spreading outwards around the tear.

"Picce of shrapnel, I think, sir."

Muir's lined face broke into a wide smile. Hasty looked so serious, almost pompous, about it that he might well have added: Kiss me, Hardy.

"Very good. Quick as you can." Muir glanced up at the sky. His action said: They'll be back, soon. He forgot Hasty and asked Steele: "How many of the buggers did we knock down?"

The Gunnery Officer hesitated, looking at Peabody.

"It's in dispute, sir. I reckon five, but the pilot makes it four."

Muir thought: Four or five out of the dozen that attacked. Not at all bad. If heavy losses could shake the Germans' morale in future attacks, the success would mean more than just so many acroplanes destroyed. It could mean weaker attacks, shy pilots not pressing home on their runs, dodging flack. But perhaps that was too much to hope for: these Jerries weren't easily discouraged.

"Yeoman. Ask the American: *How are you.*"

"Aye aye, sir."

Presently the Yank flashed back: *Some damage for'ard, two men killed and threë hurt by blast.*

Muir thought: She's come off worst of all of us. It was astonishing that out of that pandemonium could come so little damage; and considering the number of Stukas that had been downed, it was definitely a round won

by the convoy. Muir saw Hasty coming up the ladder into the bridge's centre.

"Well, Hasty? They expecting you to live?"

Hasty smiled, weakly. The Principal Medical Officer had probed, cleaned and dressed his wound with remarkable speed, but the probing had left Hasty feeling rather sick, and now here on the bridge they were all grinning at him as though there was something *funny* in getting hit in the shoulder. He didn't see any joke in it. Even the PMO had taken it as a matter of course, something of little or no consequence—like a common cold or a touch of 'flu.

"It was a piece of Stuka, sir."

Hasty turned aft to look at the radar plot. Forster grinned at him.

"All clear, sir."

Hasty nodded. He wanted to tell them all: Can't you see, I'm *wounded*! What's to grin at in that? He thought: Callous lot of bounders. Yes that was the word—*callous*. But, brightening, he thought of how impressed and sympathetic the Duchess would be: he imagined her soft, long fingers caressing his shoulder, soothing the ache out of it. There was nothing on the radar plot, so he turned away and leant against the side of the bridge. The Duchess opened her lips to him, and he pouted his own into the soft ripeness of her mouth: he hummed, softly, 'One day he'll come along, the man I love.' For Hasty, Stukas were merely unpleasant and discordant interruptions to the music of the Monseigneur, to hands that met under the table at the Auberge Bleu. These were the highlights of his present being, and war had nothing to do with death. There was a dull throbbing in his shoulder ("Only a flesh-wound," the PMO

had told him). He looked down at the backs of the look-outs' heads, turning slowly this way and that behind their mounted glasses, and he thought: If it gets a little worse than it is now—just a *little* worse—I might get hospitalised when we're back in Alex. Must take care not to get myself stuck in Malta, though! He saw himself on sick leave in Alexandria, with whole days at the disposal of the Duchess, and, in answer to a quick worry in his mind, he told himself: No, having an arm in a sling won't matter. Soon get the hang of *that*!

Peabody ambled up to him and pointed at the damaged shoulder.

"All right?"

Hasty smiled, warmly. Peabody was a decent sort of fellow. The RNR seemed to teach them more manners than Dartmouth did. Hasty decided to be casual about his injury.

"Fine, thanks. Only a flesh wound."

Peabody nodded.

"You're lucky. Better go easy with it, all the same. Keep it clean, and that sort of thing."

Hasty told him: "The doctor filled it with something that felt like sulphuric acid—or Jeycs Fluid. He said it wasn't anything to worry about. . . . Tell me, Pilot, when the war ends, will you go back to *those* things?" Hasty waved his right arm at the butting, rolling merchantmen. His gesture implied: *Surely not*!

"I suppose so. Unless I can turn over to RN. I'd like to stay on, if I can. Why?"

"I was only wondering. You know, all of us cooped up here together, and in a few years' time all split up and doing God knows what. Funny to think of."

Peabody didn't seem to be listening. He had his

glasses trained on the American, and he murmured: "Damned queer, the way that 'plane crashed. I suppose its controls jammed. Or perhaps the pilot got hit on the way down and was dead before it crashed."

Peabody dragged a tattered handkerchief out of his pocket, and used it to polish the lenses of his binoculars.

Without looking up, he asked Hasty: "What's *your* job outside?"

"I'm a script-writer."

"What's that mean?"

Hasty looked pained. From a considerable distance he explained: "Advertising. I write the text, the script of advertising."

"Good Lord! Do they pay you for that?" Peabody turned to greet Major Tregarth, who had joined them at the bridge's side. "You're looking much fitter, Major. Fresh air's the best thing for it, by far."

Simon nodded.

"Much better, thanks." He asked Hasty: "Did I hear you say that you were in advertising?"

"Yes. Why—you——?"

"All my life. You've heard of Berkeley Advertising?"

Hasty nodded violently.

"I certainly have! Nearly got a job with them once: I went for an interview, by appointment—and what do you think? I had to interview a *woman*! They had one running the production department!"

Peabody laughed.

"I had an idea you approved of women. Is the gossip wrong?"

"But not to *work* under. Bit thick, that?"

Simon told him: "The lady you mention is Helen

Reeves. She's the most competent executive in any London agency—you can take my word for that. I've spent twenty years building up Berkeley Advertising, and she's only been with me for five, and she knows a damn sight more about it than *I* do."

Hasty swallowed: he looked at Simon now not so much as at a middle-aged Army passenger with a weak stomach, as at a man who might, conceivably, give him a job. You never knew. He smiled diffidently at the Major.

"I suppose one would get used to it, sir. But just to go for an interview and find a woman on the other side of the desk—well, it *was* rather a stunner. Of course, if she's so good——"

"Quite." Simon cut into the young man's gabble. He bunched his left hand into a fist and stared at the heavy gold ring on the little finger. He told Hasty: "Mrs Reeves has a directorship now. She's running the whole show, while I'm away. And doing damn well, too."

Hardly noticed her at first, he thought. Not as a person, an individual—not as a woman. She was just a female filling what was normally a man's job and doing it with impersonal and sexless efficiency. She even got on with the women! But she never *stood out*: she just fitted into the scheme of the firm, and after a few months—well, there she was, Mrs Reeves, and some of the women called her Helen. That was all he knew of her. Then, at the party Simon gave to celebrate the firm's twentieth anniversary—Helen had been with them about a year, no more—he found himself talking to her not as to a member of his staff but as to an intelligent and strikingly attractive woman. (The next



morning he'd wondered about it, about how much he'd had to drink before the party to equip himself for silly jokes and stupid flattery and for dancing with the worst of the wives. He'd told himself, on the way into Town, that he'd behaved in a most undignified manner and that he ought to have known better.) He and Helen had been the only 'odd' ones, he because Jill, his wife, refused to take part in these infrequent but necessary functions, and Helen because——

"You—are a widow, Mrs Reeves?"

"No." She'd glanced at him then, quickly, assessing the quality and quantity of his interest. "No—my husband and I were divorced."

He'd thought: Did she divorce him, or was it the other way round? From the way she'd expressed it, from that vagueness, he imagined that Reeves had divorced *her*, and he'd dropped the subject quickly and awkwardly in favour of an oil-company's account. But a year later he discovered that she had divorced her husband, and he'd thought immediately of the difference between her way of describing that situation and the way Jill would have done it. Jill would have said—and he could imagine the flicker of contempt that would have crossed her face as she'd have said it—*I divorced him*. And now—when it was fact—he could smell the heavy virtue and the self-pity, edged and ribbed with malice, rising in the steam over countless cups of tea: that soft bitterness and the pseudo-gentle femininity. Feeling it and smelling it and knowing that this was, in truth, how it would be now, he looked down at the sea, which made him sick and frightened him and which he didn't understand, and he saw it in contrast as an ally—something clean that had no stink of hypocrisy about it.

Vicious and cold and demoralising, but entirely honest in its detachment. It hadn't been spoilt by the gift of a brain.

Funny, he thought, that over all those years of unhappiness and dissatisfaction I never thought of the why of it. I never really *thought about* Jill, I only—I suppose—disliked her. Never really considered it—not in any detail. I never sat down at a table or climbed a hill or walked up and down a platform or caught a train thinking: *This* is what is wrong; *here* is where the rot starts. I never put my car round a corner with the tyres sliding and me casing the wheel to avoid a skid and at the same time thinking that *in this thing* or *in that respect* lay the error's source or the strength of its miserable existence. I never lay in the bath and thought through the heat of it: *This and that and the other, and unless I do something about it I'll end up not a man*. Simon told himself: I never faced the problem on its own. I recognised its being there between us, and instead of fighting it clearly, I fumbled at it and let it go along its own set path, while my only clear and lively thought went into the making of Berkeley Advertising Ltd. I never concentrated on the problem of myself and Jill because it was a matter more baffling and less rewarding than even the darkest days of Berkeley.

That was, until Helen. And, talking to her one day—months after that party: if anything I'd avoided her as a result of it, thinking I'd made a fool of myself (had I?)—talking to her that day about a symbol which one client of the Agency had rejected because it bore a likeness to another symbol which some other poky little organisation had used a couple of months before, talking to her quietly and matter-of-factly about this routine stupidity

—well, at that moment (it was a sketch of a little sea-horse that we were talking about, and just the mark for that particular account)—at that moment of dull and inconsequential discussion, suddenly, altogether out of place and foreign, that *depth*, immeasurable depth of—oh, hell! sympathy? No, that's a silly word for it: *understanding*, a warmth—yes, that's closer, although it doesn't really touch the reality—something almost miraculous, brilliant, coming to life quickly and sharply, immediate out of nothing, clear out of fog: something there now that wasn't a moment before, never was until this moment, and there now because of me, I that had brought it out into life and being! And it wasn't only passively there, not just objectively attractive and warm, but actively and livingly; not asked for or aimed at but *there*! Simon remembered the moment of its starting. Leaning now with his body pressed (to hold his stomach in against the ship's wild motion) against the side of the bridge, he remembered that in that moment he'd recognised this newness as something that would have to take its course, and that he wasn't scared any more, not avoiding personal thought: only loving the start and promise of what felt like happiness. There was no past and there was no doubt. Then the ship tottered on a crest, her stern quivered and she hung with her bow gathered for the violent and sickening descent, he felt the sickness rising in him, and he thought of the night before, and he knew that if Helen could have seen him and known his weakness in the last twelve hours she'd have given him back to Jill. He was aware of a voice at his elbow, exaggeratedly polite, deferential!

Hasty asked him: "Are you sure you're all right, sir?" Hasty was thinking: You never know. Jobs mayn't be

easy, after the war. Other chaps getting demobbed first—new blokes with fresh training and experience: “Oughtn’t you to go below, sir?”

Simon shook his head. He’d recognised the tone, and loathed it like he loathed his own weakness.

“I’m all right, thank you.”

He thought: If God made Helen, perhaps He knows what went wrong with *my* construction? And perhaps He could tell me why one of his hallmarked products, Helen, should be happy to go through social hell to link herself with one of His factory rejects? This young idiot mouthing at my elbow is after a job, but Helen had one—she could have taken any one of a dozen—and as for husbands, she’s the sort of woman every man must want. But she chose me. He thought: She chose me too late. I was a has-been long before, and I had no right to let her think anything else. I wanted her like any man would, and even then I knew I wasn’t worth her. He looked down at the tumbling sea and thought: God, don’t let her know. Anything else—anything; but never let her know.

Peter Tregarth sat back from his sight and asked the Marine Bugler (he was a drummer really, but he seemed to do more bugling than drumming and it was more natural to call him a bugler) politely but firmly:

“Would you mind moving aft, down-wind, with that whistle?”

The boy didn’t move, or answer: he had a contempt for midshipmen, only a year or so older than he was and far less experienced in many ways—in women, for instance, in the hard ways of a slum and the lessons it taught to a child. Most of the time the bugler looked

about fourteen years old; but then, suddenly while you were still looking at him, his face would change under observation and display all the wisdom and knowledge of the East End in its less attractive moods. Now he gave no sign of having heard the midshipman's request, but he stopped whistling and, reaching into the pocket of his tunic, brought out a grey pellet of chewing-gum and slipped it into his mouth. Tregarth was sorry to have hurt his feelings, as he obviously had, but the whistle had been a penetrating, monotonous sound, and with the wind's force blowing it aft, one tune was much the same as another, and all of them were hell. The few tunes which the young marine chose to deliver were the ones which, when they came daily in the programme misnamed Forces' Favourites, compelled most of the listeners to reach hurriedly for the switches or volume-controls on the loud-speakers. Either there were more juvenile marine musicians than one knew of, or the choice was made by some announcer who had been maltreated and was taking this way of getting his own back on his employers. Anyway, the bugler stopped whistling.

All of them in the front of the bridge and on its port side were watching an activity out on the convoy's bow: the wing destroyer, *Mistral*, who had escorted them earlier to the sinking of the troopship, had a flag signal flying, and she and the destroyer next inside her had left the screen, and both of them were milling about in a seemingly haphazard manner out to port. *Mistral* had stopped, almost: she lay stopped or dead slow, meeting the seas evenly, while the other destroyer was steaming out across her bows rolling her gun's to the waves, beam-on to the seas and taking them hard over her

starboard side. Now *Mistral* was moving again, flinging her sharp, slender length at the huge waves like Quixote's lance at the windmill—only in this lance there was no breaking; it was what she was built for. The two destroyers were crossing and at full speed heading out ahead and to port.

Now a string of flags from the Admiral was acknowledged immediately from *Pelorus* and from every other ship: the flags came fluttering down with the signalmen dragging on the lower halyards to keep them inboard against the wind as they dropped, and the whole convoy swung away to starboard, every ship altering course thirty degrees to starboard, so that when they steadied, the van was led by the destroyers on the starboard wing and the centre by *Pelorus*. On this new course the weather was on the bow, and the sea took full advantage of it, crashing over not only on to the fo'c'sle, but into the waist as well, and the ship rolled and staggered like a drunk.

The turn had left the two destroyers clear out on the port beam. Peter watched them, *Mistral* at full speed, while the other destroyer held the contact (it could only be a submarine) and *Mistral*, small, breaking the waves' crests and diving into the deep valleys between them where you could only see her upper-works, sometimes only her mast, the rest of her hidden behind nearer piled-up sea and foam flying from its edge. Peter saw the depth-charges soaring from her port and starboard throwers. She raced on and ahead, and when the diamond pattern of charges shattered the surface with their wide, flat spouts they seemed dangerously close to the destroyer's stern. *Mistral* turned to regain contact on her target and the second destroyer moved in, and

Peter saw another pair of the black canisters lobbing out and falling without visible splash into the white of sea broken and leaping, explosive on its own. The destroyer would have dropped the first charge from the trap on her stern, then the two throwers throwing ahead and another from the stern for the centre of the diamond, and a last one to complete the pattern. From the surface this was an evolution, a drill aimed at the destruction of a submarine: from below the surface it was devilry, it was the sound of screws passing overhead and the waiting for charges to explode when they sank to the depth set on them by the destroyer's torpedo-men . . . but from the surface there was no thought of that, only of the lethal weapons in the submarine and the danger to the convoy. Each was a devil to the other, each ruthless and looking only for a kill: one horror against another.

*Mistral* was moving in again (on the convoy's quarter, now), and suddenly ahead of her that deep-green rising whaleback wasn't sea, it was steel—black and shining, throwing white froth, and still rising: a long, angled bow and the jumping-wire; and farther back twin periscope standards rising too, all of it sharp and sudden and, although it had been hunted and detected, somehow surprising—startlingly close and real. *Mistral* had sheered off to starboard, and both the destroyers had opened fire with their for'ard guns—small flashes and a lot of smoke—and following that the puny pop-gun crack of distant and small explosions; the wind took most of the sound of the firing. The submarine's bridge rose weltering green and white, and almost immediately a shell burst in it, and another tore a wide, jagged hole in her casing, near the bow. Several more shells hit,

and for a second there was the small black figure of a man standing on the forefront of her bridge, waving his arms, and it looked (though you couldn't tell, from this distance and with the motion and violence and another bursting shell for'ard) as if he had something in his hand—a cap, perhaps, that he was waving. The destroyers ceased fire and more men came up: you could see them pouring up and jumping from the bridge into the sea. Then a plume of spray shot up from the submarine's ballast tanks, and another jet too, so that it looked as if, after all, she was trying to dive again, and *Mistral* opened up, and her shell smacked into the bridge or just below it in a burst of yellowish smoke and a tinge of flame. The submarine was sinking, not diving. Her bow was still high in the air and she was settling, and there was no man on her shattered bridge. Two more shells from the destroyers burst on her hull, just for'ard of the bridge. She went down quickly, with her bow high and plainly holed in several places, and now, looking at where she'd broken out of the waves, that was all there was—waves: no enemy except the sea.

The destroyers were circling slowly now, over the place where the enemy had sunk. Flags broke from the Admiral's yard, and a minute later the convoy swung back to its westerly course. Way out there in the growing distance the two destroyers still hovered over and around their kill. Peter heard his father's voice close beside him.

“What was that all about, Peter?”

The midshipman sat back and blinked his eyes, partly because pressing them against the small, hard rims of the binoculars had made them sore and tired



them, and partly because he had to collect himself before he answered.

"They sank a U-boat, sir. Now they're looking for survivors."

"But why did it come up like that? Wouldn't it 've been better off if it had stayed out of sight?"

Peter thought: He's got eyes, he's intelligent and he saw it: he must know. Does he think I'm so much of a child that I can't tell when he's just making conversation, or working up to one? Can't he be honest and leave me alone—he left her, can't he make his mind up to it?

He told his father: "They blew it up with depth-charges. Forced it up. Or the charges damaged it so that it had to surface. That's most of the use of depth-charges. They don't often sink them outright, under water."

"Oh." Simon Tregarth nodded. He glanced round quickly, and asked his son. "Peter. We're here, together. I can't force you, but —well, I'm your father; we're very much alike; we used to be good friends a long time ago and just because——"

Ordinary Seaman Hardcastle, on his way aft to the ladder which he had to climb in order to take over another hour's trick in the crow's nest, had seen the two of them together. For the couple of months that he'd been in the ship he'd known Peter, but since the youngster hadn't recognised him, the scruffy, uniformed sailor, as the polite, white-collared tobacconist from home, Hardcastle hadn't introduced himself. He was enough of an individual for that. But now, Mr Simon and Master Peter, and over that Mrs Hardcastle at home and agog for news—well!

"Mr Tregarth—you remember me? Sold you Players, I have, masses of 'em, and Three Nuns, the last six years?"

Simon stared blankly at the unslaven, smiling sailor.

Hardcastle tried another tack. "Well, Mr Peter, *you'll* remember? Bull's-eyes it was mostly—them and the little packets o' sherbet with a liquorice stick in the top——"

Peter swivelled around in his seat, saw through the beard and the sailor to the tobacconist.

"You're—Mr Hardcastle."

The sailor laughed.

"Oh, no, sir. Not *Mister*! Not till the old 'V' goes off, I'm not! No, Mr Peter, I'm a blooming O.D.; but it gave me quite a turn to see you two gentlemen together, and I couldn't 'elp but stop. Took me back, 'it did, and——"

Simon had it now.

"You—sell tobacco and that sort of thing, don't you, in——" He was obviously embarrassed that he had been so slow in recognising the man. "In that uniform, and—damn it, I'd hardly believe you were the same 'man!'"

Simon was plainly conscious of his blundering attempt at friendship, but the sailor smoothed it over.

"Perhaps I'm not, Mr Simon. Perhaps I'm more of a sailor now. It alters a bloke, like; and then I used to shave more often, too: couldn't meet Mrs Tregarth like this, could I, sir?"

Hardcastle laughed, and the other two smiled, only not easily because the mention of 'Mrs Tregarth' somehow sharpened the situation. Put an edge on it.

Hardcastle looked at the crown on Simon's shoulder,

and he added, "You know, sir, you owe me eight-and-sevenpence-halfpenny. Outstanding on the books it was, when I left. Anyone'd think I was Admiral Cunningham, the 'urry they was in to get me off! But I remember that eight-and-sevenpence-halfpenny distinct because when I 'anded over to Mrs 'Ardcastle I said to 'er: 'Don't you go worrying about that,' I said; 'and don't bother Mrs Tregarth with it neither,' I told 'er. 'No,' I said. 'Mr Simon'll be back for a pound of the curly-cut before long—you mark my words.' And Mrs 'Ardcastle, she said——"

Simon had a hand delving in the wide pocket of his battledress trousers. His intention was obvious.

Hardcastle broke off, told him quickly: "Oh, no, Mr Simon! I'm no tobacconist—not 'ere, sir! Put the books out proper, that would! No, sir—that'll keep till we get 'ome." The sailor's eyes flickered down at his canvas shoes and back up again to Simon's face. "We'll be seeing you again, sir, I suppose, when this lark's over?"

Simon stared at the man's easy but interested face; he read the backing to the question and he thought: So they all know. And soon they'll all know, too, that I sailed in this blasted ship and that my own son wouldn't acknowledge me. Perhaps it'll come out the other way round—that *I* wouldn't know *him*. God! he thought, when a man steps out of line because he has to, because he's human and has no pretensions to the wearing of a halo or to the moral worth of the carrying of a particular cross which is unlike Your'son's, in that it is all weight and no value—when a man thinks it out and decides that he was never made to be a saint or a martyr or a monk, or even an example, You certainly have the

knack of evening things up. Your malice is as great as Your love, and I think that You expect rather more than is reasonable to expect. I didn't say quickly: This is what I want to do, and to hell with everyone else. I didn't think: I want Helen and I dislike Jill, and so here I go. I spent weeks and months fighting for decision, and there were whole nights that I didn't sleep at all and days when I couldn't eat, I was a battle-ground of thought and belief and habit and inclination and revolt. I went to church on my own when there was nobody in it except an old woman sweeping out one of the back pews. I fought a few actions there alone on my knees, and I asked You to help me choose. Whether You tried to help me or not I don't know—all I know is that in the end I chose Helen, and I don't see that in that choice I have harmed anyone but myself, and possibly Helen. And in that I ask Your help again, because Helen has never deserved to be hurt, and all of this was my doing, not hers.

Hardcastle had gone to his hour of watch, up there over their heads.

Simon looked at his son and asked him: "Peter, d'you think you'll help yourself by cutting yourself away? Can't you see that it isn't natural, and that what isn't natural never truly works?"

Like me and Jill, he thought: *that* didn't work because it had no life of its own making; it was forced, right from the start. *I* did the forcing.

He asked his son: "Do you think you're strong enough on your own to cut yourself off and deny all that made you? Perhaps it's easy enough now, but later, when you have more and bigger problems——?"

Peter turned then, and looked at his father. For a moment Simon thought there was an answer coming—he saw something felt and ready for expression in the boy's eyes: then the curtain came down again and there was no answer, only Peter turning away as though he couldn't say it or didn't want to.

Simon asked him:

"Well, can you?"

Peter swung round, quickly, decisively.

"Yes, I can. Just as *you* did. I don't ask you: Can you cut yourself off? Because you've *done* it. Or I thought you had. I'm not blaming, criticising. But you ask me if I'm strong enough, and—look, sir—I think *I* am, but you—*you* don't seem to be holding to it."

Peter thought, seeing his father's face: I don't want to hurt him; I only want to tell him that I'm as free to choose as he was. He's throwing those old hooks in again, or trying to; he cut himself loose, and now he's trying to grapple on again. He wants it both ways.

He asked his father: "Aren't you going back on what you started?"

Peter fingered the switch on his sight, he worked the looseness in the knobbed ring that swung it. He hadn't words or expression for what he wanted to say.

## Chapter 11

COMMANDER DESCOURT accepted a cup of cocoa from the bridge messenger, and, holding it with great care in his right hand, lowered himself slowly and carefully backwards into a sitting position on the low steel grid which was a narrow platform under the port-side gunnery sight. The act of lowering himself to the step sent long bites of pain shooting up his back, the lines in his face deepened against the pain, and for a moment, with his teeth clenched, he held his breath while he waited for the worst to pass. Gradually it eased, seeping, aching out of the muscles as though they'd been frostbitten and now were thawing out. There was only a jag of it now and then, and a silly, reasonless anger in his brain, so that even the cocoa, which for all his care he'd slopped over the mug's rim and on to the deck, looked back at him in its dirty 'untidy splutter as though it was an enemy and had only slopped itself to spite him. That red-headed fool of Hasty's was shouting:

"Bogey, green three-oh, eighteen miles, moving left to right!"

Descourt thought: *Bogeys, Bogeys!* Couldn't someone have picked on a better word? He had to stand up again now, and he hadn't even touched his cocoa. Then he thought: *Damn* it! damn it to hell! But I'll drink this muck before I move. *Bogeys, bogeys.*

Aloud he said, raising the mug and automatically

slanting it against the changing angle of the deck:  
“*Bogeys be bugged!*”

The Yeoman of Signals shot him a quick, surprised glance, the cocoa, burnt his lips and that red-headed sailor yelled: “Fifteen miles, closing!”

Descourt set the mug down just under the step he'd been using as a seat, and grabbing hold of a projection on the gunnery sight, he hauled himself up in one clean, swift movement which gave the impression of a fit man rising to his feet. He stood for a moment pretending to interest himself in the glassed-in bearing indicator of the sight, while in fact he was only waiting for the acid to stop tearing holes in the muscles of his back.

When he felt able to speak, he turned and moved a few paces across the bridge and asked Captain Muir bitterly, as though he hated him: “Sound off, sir?”

Muir shot a glance at the Commander. That glance took all of it in, but Muir was careful not to show recognition or—what would be worse—sympathy.

“Yes, please.”

The ship's company had been relaxed to what was known as the second degree of readiness: in half an hour, with the coming of dusk, they'd have gone back to the first degree, to action stations. Perhaps it had been wishful thinking on Muir's and Descourt's part to imagine that the enemy would leave them alone for the couple of hours before that zero hour of dusk; yet from experience they knew that in this period the attacks usually fell away while the bombers waited for that dangerous half-light, light enough to attack by, but full of shadows, and a dimmed-out sky. . . . During the afternoon there'd been two more Stuka attacks: the flagship had been hit on her fo'c'sle and the Norwegian

freighter had taken a near-miss which (going by a rumour in *Pelorus*) had started a knock on her port screw, bent a blade or the shaft. But for the time being she was still making the convoy at twelve knots, and three more Stukas had been felled.

Forster yelled like a bookie shouting the odds: "Green five-oh, twenty miles, opening!"

With the last notes of the bugle-call still humming in their ears, men were rushing up the ladder into the bridge, and some of them were still chewing a last mouthful of early supper. Muir watched them, the thinning stream, and he thought: 'Twenty miles, and opening: the bastards are holding out, waiting for dusk. Either that, or the radar report was wrong; not a body of aircraft, but a single shadower keeping touch through an occasional glimpse of masts and superstructure. In any case, and whatever it was, this was plainly the prelude to an assault, to something that was planned and building up, pilots watching the minute-hands of their watches. Muir visualised an 'ops' room in Crete: the wide, low table and short, guttural comments and orders from leather-faced officers; pop-eyed corporals with long sticks pushing coloured discs across the squared table, and out of a loudspeaker a pilot's report, position and range and bearing, and one of the corporals advancing those discs a couple of squares nearer to Malta. All right, Muir thought; all right, you buggers; all right. We're waiting for you. Don't be all night coming.

Flack, peering into the binnacle under an impression that he was helping Peabody to check true course against magnetic, felt a certain discomfort in his stomach. He knew that it wasn't any form of seasick-



ness, and so he told himself, not looking himself in the eye, that it was excitement. Or perhaps, he thought: Perhaps I'm hungry. But he knew that he was too old to be excited at the prospect of a night action against torpedo bombers, and he knew, too, that the taste of a corned-beef supper was still in his mouth, and he certainly wasn't hungry. All the same, he told himself that it was excitement and hunger.

Flack had no fear of the daylight bombing attacks—the open attacks that you could see coming and developing, plain and black and noisy. There was a definite comfort in the noise and flash of oordite that went to meet the danger overhead: those Stukas, for all their sirens and their savage, swift and murderous intent, hadn't worried him at all—certainly not enough to twist the bunched nerve-mass in the pit of his stomach. Quickened his pulse a little, perhaps—not much else. Flack, all his life, had been a close and painstaking observer of his own reactions to this and that. He'd sit by himself for half an hour after an Admiral's inspection and tell himself, going over the whole thing step by step in a careful and usually painful post-mortem: I shouldn't have answered *that*. Next time I must look him in the eyes and remember that I'm an individual, that being an Admiral doesn't entitle him to advance baseless criticism and only get a 'Yessir; quite, sir,' in reply. Could I help it that there was an empty tomato-sauce bottle in a clean mess-tin in Number Twenty-three Mess? Should I have coloured with embarrassment when he found some dirt between the prongs of a fork on the table of Mess Seven? . . . Now Flack thought, feeling the tightness in his stomach: Something's wrong. And he shut his eyes against it,

against his loathing of the confusion of darkness and surprise. In the dark, air attack was different, somehow; the sea came into it because you couldn't see the sky, and the sea in the dark was a more deadly thing to Flack than any Stuka in the sunlight. In daylight the sea was a thing to wonder at, in a respectful manner to admire; but in the dark it was vicious and cynical and its voice was a threat.

Flack peered into the binnacle, told Peabody:

*"Now!"*

And Peabody answered: "Right. Once more."

Flack thought: Something's out of focus, out of touch. Tonight is wrong, and it hasn't even started yet: I've never felt like this before—not even when we were taking the Army out of Crete, not when the searchlights got us off Tobruk. This is plain ridiculous; it's a lot of rubbish!

He asked Peabody: "All right?"

The navigator looked hard at the tall, hovering Lieutenant-Commander.

They'd made the last check while Flack was thinking about Crete: now, a full minute after they'd finished, Flack asked: "All right?"

"How d'you mean, Stringy?"

"Compass. You finished?"

"Yes. I—told you, O.K. Didn't you hear? You nodded——"

Peabody was still looking at Flack as though he was wondering what was the matter. As though he wanted to ask: *You* all right, Stringy?

Dark came down in slow, slanting shadows against a dimmed-out horizon in the west and an overhead flush

of pink and silver that shifted into red and gold, and was as removed from war as were Hasty's reminiscences of women. A final rapid brush-stroke of brilliant colour reached up in challenge and defiance to the sure approach of night, then faded gently to the sea itself, no longer grey or green, but black white-flecked with the dusk passing into dark. Shapes of ships faded so that without binoculars you could only see them by their bow-waves and their wakes, clear and broad, like main roads across the moving sea. Radar reports were loud, frequent and bewildering, guns at the ready for defensive barrage, a sense of growing confusion in all the exactitude of ranges, bearings and technical preparedness. It was irritating as well as confusing that the enemy did not attack—only closed in first from one quarter and then from another and the contact faded, vanished, or the closing menace changed to a range opening, a withdrawal, a pointless holding-off at the very moment when it had seemed to be real and coming, in an hour when attacks were always expected and always came, the enemy taking advantage of a changing and uncertain light and visibility. Time and again the Fleet stood on its toes, expectant, and the tension fell away to nothing except anticlimax and more waiting and watching and wanting to get it over. Like an undecided dentist poising the drill over an aching tooth, then stopping the machine time and time again to choose another point—never starting to grind. By the time the drill bit into the tooth, the patient would be exhausted by nothing but the waiting.

But that couldn't be the enemy's object: it was much more probable that weather conditions were making it difficult for them to locate the convoy.

Forster, his voice now hoarse from half an hour of it, was shouting: "Green one-three-five, fifteen miles, closing!"

Peter Tregarth heard the report, and the next: "Green one-four-oh, twelve miles, bogeys still closing!"

Peter thought, flatly: In a moment they'll be twenty miles and going away like mad. Probably nothing more than Father Christmas on a jet-propelled sledge. He thought: All of this has very likely been nothing much more than something shaky in the radar set.

Forster's voice came again, sharper than before, almost as though he was interested in what he was telling: "Ten miles, bearing steady, closing!"

Peter's was the port sight, and this approach from the other side called for no effort from him. He swept his own side steadily, turning the bearing-ring slowly with the fingers of his right hand, while with his left he moved the elevation wheel this way and that, turning the angle of the glasses up and down in contradiction to the cruiser's motion. He was beginning to feel the effects of that motion in his stomach: though he'd always gone to great trouble to keep it a secret, he was as susceptible as anyone to seasickness, and in spite of a carefully tightened belt he was feeling it now, and it sickened him to an extent that he was indifferent to what was in progress or coming. Before he could deal with that he had to win a small, hard battle in his stomach.

Out on the convoy's starboard side a destroyer had opened fire with her four-sevens: the sound came thin and somehow ineffectual on the wind—someone wasting time and shells, doing no good. Peter thought: Probably shooting at seagulls. But he glanced round, astern, resting from the rims of his glasses, and over the

stern superstructure he saw, way out on the other quarter, fine to the stern, balls of white and orange tracer curving away in slow motion, straight to the summit of their curve, but then plainly drifting with the wind. That must be a Hunt destroyer, and it was possible that she knew what she was firing at.

Certainly nobody else knew, and when Hasty told Forster: "Range and bearing now," and Forster asked his telephone: "Range and bearing now?" and listened for a moment while the headphones crackled, Forster shrugged his wide shoulders as though he was fed up with the whole business and reported back: "Echoes confused, sir."

The destroyer had stopped firing, and astern there was no more tracer. Only the sea's surge and the cruiser's rise and fall and her engines pounding, now and then racing when her stern rose. The wind was not exactly cold, but it was damp and sticky, for all its strength. It was pitch black all around except for the broken tops of waves and the wakes dwindling out with small bends in them, where the head-sea had beaten the Quartermaster's skill in steering straight courses. A Quartermaster looked always ahead, but a man on the bridge who wanted to judge his steering looked astern at the wake, and saw how it had been. You couldn't keep your eye for long on a lighted compass when it was your business to watch the sea.

From the flagship came the executive signal: her stern went lower in the waves as her screws speeded and she moved ahead, out of her station on the convoy's port bow. *Pelorus*, too, and the other cruisers, sprang forward: the merchantmen's dark shapes fell away

astern as the four cruisers passed through the gaps in the inner screen of Hunts, and, with a swing of thirty degrees to starboard, re-formed into line ahead. The Fleet destroyers weaved and steadied into a tight defensive screen across the cruisers' van, and leaving the convoy with its own close escort of Hunts, the Fleet steered north-west at twenty-five knots, putting itself between the convoy and any possible night attack by surface ships. In the morning, at first light, they'd rendezvous with the convoy on the old course, which was a pencil line ending at the swept channel off Valetta.

The wind was on the bow, and with the ship's speed added to its opposing strength, it came tearing and crashing across the bridge, drowning with its own noise the rattle and the grind and race of the screws, silencing the sea: each wave exploded against the cruiser's stem, cannoned across her fo'c'sle and on to the for'ard turrets, flooded into the port waist: the four-inch guns' crews, sheltering behind their gun-shields, heard it slamming hard against the steel. Peter Tregarth turned up the collar of his oilskin coat: the coat was several sizes too large for him and only his eyes showed over the top of his collar. As well as he could, he swept the horizon and the lower sky, but it was like looking through black cotton-wool, and his stomach was no happier than it had been an hour earlier. His sense of personal discomfort was acute. While in harbour he had always been bored and wanting nothing but to get to sea and into some sort of action. Now he had at the back of his mind a feeling of homesickness for that harbour. Action was one thing: this was quite different. This was misery. He told himself to forget it, to fight it off, that it was more imagined than physical; but in that

moment it came close again, suffocating and repulsive. Suddenly he was hot and sweating under the oilskin: then, as it passed, it left him chilled and trembling, the sweat like ice on his body and his teeth chattering. He turned the sight slowly, straining his eyes at a vague difference in shades of dark which was the horizon and which slanted this way and that and rose and fell and sometimes vanished altogether, so that he didn't know if he was looking at sea or sky. He thought: Surely they can't fly, in this wind? Surely we're safe while it holds?

Forster yelled, his voice almost a scream with the edge that he put on it to beat the wind: "Bogeys, green four-oh, moving left to right!"

Peter felt the weakness that grew out of his stomach and he thought, dully: God! let them be seagulls, let them be a fault in the radar set. Whatever they are, keep them away till I get over this!

But Forster screeched again: "Second formation, green one-six-oh, sixteen mi', moving right to left! And—green four-five, fifteen miles, closing!"

A voice from the director crackled over the wires into Peter's headphones.

"S-one, S-two, with blue barrage load, load, load!"

Reports, orders, confusion. Wind and sea and dark and the ship heaving to the waves, quick movement on the front of the bridge and the guns reporting. Ready! The loud-speakers clicked into their low, dull, electric moan, and Commander Descourt's voice slid sharp and acid into all the ship's compartments.

"All quarters alert. Enemy torpedo bombers are approaching from the starboard bow and quarter. That's all."

The click again as the speakers were switched off. On

the starboard bow a destroyer opened fire, making it all real—no longer just the flicker of light on a radar screen.

Forster shouted: "Echoes green four-oh to green one-seven-five, sir, ranges five to ten miles."

Peter thought: The buggers are all over the place: must be lots of them. It surprised him to find that he was no longer feeling sick: he forced all his concentration into a painstaking search of the port side, paying particular attention to the quarter because some of those reports had been of aircraft well aft on the starboard side, and they might easily be expected to slip around the Fleet's stern and come in to attack on a red bearing. Peter was training his glasses slowly across the thick greyness on the port quarter when, as surprisingly as a white rabbit comes out of a conjuror's top hat, a tall sheet of white-and-orange flame flung up out of the darkness astern and the blast of the explosion struck across them not just noise, but tough and thick, like a blow from a huge fist: the flash lit up *Pelorus* as clearly as if a dozen searchlights had suddenly splashed her with their concentrated beams. The cruiser astern of them had been torpedoed on her starboard side, just under the bridge. The bridge paintwork was blazing, she fell off to port, out of the line and the fourth cruiser swept up under her stern, plain to see in the light of the flames as she closed up in *Pelorus*'s wake and the torpedoed ship dropped astern, still swinging and burning and listing savagely to starboard. Now for the first time Peter felt the closeness and reality of fear; he knew that in the split second of that torpedo striking home there'd have been men killed and burnt and maimed—perhaps hundreds of them. He sensed the vulnerability of men and ships, and all of it was close



and menacing and personal—not a game any more, no sort of sport or evolution, but only an intense desire for survival. The wind screamed and the sea, down there, shouted applause, yelled: Encore! Peter dragged his imagination off the lonely burning ship with the agony in her, drifting back, alone. All the destroyers out to starboard were firing now; fast, four-sevens shouting and pompoms pumping and the snarling Oerlikons came back on the wind and the sky was full of tracer. Peter swept the port side with his binoculars, and suddenly he heard the midshipman on the other sight saying urgently, his voice sharp over the crackling, humming circuit:

“ADO’s sight target! Torpedo bomber green four-five closing, ADO’s sight target!”

Peter thought: It must be inside the destroyers, for him to have seen it. Nobody’s shooting at it, and it must be close—probably making its attacking run. He thought: Why don’t the four-inch open up? Damn it! the bastard ’ll be inside their barrage, and by now, if it *is* attacking, it’ll have dropped its fish. Then the starboard four-inch *did* fire—a couple of rounds from each mounting—and the flagship’s guns were firing, too, on an after bearing, and they were still shooting when the torpedo struck *Pelorus*, right astern on her starboard side. The cruiser leapt like a terrified horse, she leapt and jerked under the impact, and the noise was nothing in its noticeable effect compared to the felt impact of the strike and the explosion. She flung her stern up and the whole ship quivered, staggered as though she was trying to keep going and couldn’t. She seemed to struggle forward, and a tongue of yellow sprang up and died quickly and from back aft, where the torpedo had hit, came the

dreadful sound of tearing parting steel. At that moment (all of it had lasted no more than two or perhaps three seconds) Peter thought: All right, *we've had it*, but he thought it impersonally, matter-of-factly, as though it didn't matter now—certainly without the fear that had gripped him when that other ship had been hit. He went on searching the sky on his own side, and while he was still thinking: *This is it*, while he told himself that in a dulled and unfeeling way, his eyes still worked without his conscious thought to direct them, and when in the circle of his glasses he caught that dim shadow streaking up the port side low on the water, dark and silent, utterly vicious in quiet, destructive aim, habit and training worked too so that the index-finger of his left hand pushed the switch over, and his voice went emotionless and steady into the mouthpiece of the telephone:

"ADO's sight port, target. Red one-three-oh, moving left to right, about three thousand yards."

"Director target!"

"P-one, *on!* . . . P-two, *on!*"

"Blue barrage, fire!"

The guns crashed out under his left ear, and in between their sharp explosions the close-range weapons farther aft joined in a constant, excited chatter, throwing multi-coloured tracer out across the beam. Peter watched, fascinated, his glasses on the bomber as its left-to-right movement checked, and that meant that it had turned on to its attacking course. He knew that he shouldn't be watching it—now that the director had put the guns on to it he ought to be sweeping for a new target—but the sight of it held him, and he couldn't do anything else but watch it coming in with the tracer

flinging out against it. He didn't have to turn the sight any more because the 'plane was running straight in on a dropping run, and the bearing never shifted a degree. Peter was still watching when a shell from the four-inch barrage burst close over the bomber, and by the light of a flicker of flame that sprang out of and ran along its fuselage he saw it falter, almost stall, one wing lowered and the 'plane struggled to hold its course. He saw the torpedo drop awkward and askew, and the machine stalled hard, its nose up with the weight of the torpedo gone from it. The 'plane shot up, burning; it came rising out of the dark, then it stalled again and its nose went down, and it came in fast out of control and crashed on to the port four-inch gun-deck. Out of a weird but somehow peaceful impression of no more effort Peter was aware that the world he lived in was composed entirely of flame and exploding four-inch shells: *Pelorus* had stopped, and she was angled steeply, with her stern down and awash. The pompoms were still firing, as though they liked the sound of their own voices. From down there round the four-inch, which were silent now except for the noise of flames and now and then a shell bursting from the fire's heat, came the sound of men's voices loud enough to beat the wind and the sea's insistent clamour, which sounded so much like applause.

Captain Muir faced aft from the front of the bridge and he told Descourt: "Abandon ship."

The stern had broken clean off and there wasn't a hope of *Pelorus* staying afloat. The sea was pounding at the exposed after-bulkhead and the Engineer Commander had told Muir that it couldn't hold for more than a few minutes—half an hour at most.

“Aye aye, sir.”

Descourt saluted Muir and went aft to pass the order over the loud-speaker system. As he switched it on he was thinking: I'm a damn sight too old for this sort of thing.

I pushed my empty glass across the table, and Peter Tregarth poured me the third drink that I'd had out of his second bottle. The first bottle he'd dropped under the table when it was empty, and now it was on its side, and my feet were moving it slowly to and fro a few inches this way and that, so that it clicked gently as it crossed the brassed edge of one of the boards of the submarine's number one battery. I liked the click—it was solid and reassuring, and it kept Peter's reminiscence down to what it was: a piece of the past, and that click was now and close and easier to like than an echo of the past.

I told him: “Uh. But, you know, I never even noticed that crash when the thing landed on us. . . . When I went down there later and it was all mess around the guns I never even wondered what had been the cause of it. Odd, isn't it? But I suppose it's understandable—we'd been fished, anyway, and we'd had it and another small centre of damage—”

I was talking fast about nothing because I didn't want Peter's story to go any further. I didn't want to get any closer to that Carley Float and the dead man called Lofty and Peter's father, to the horror that I'd steelled myself to forget—or rather, not *forget*, but *not to consider*. *Not to think about*.

I told Peter, my words stupid, banal and only uttered for the sake of words: “It mixes you up so that after the

first thing you don't look for an explanation of any other."

Peter seemed not to have heard me. He said as though this was a continuation of something he'd been saying before: "My father——"

"Peter. You remember that troopship that got fished when we were ferrying Indians into Cyprus? The way the oil spread out burning on the water and they couldn't swim fast enough to keep ahead of it? And we could only watch, waiting for them with the nets down on the starboard side while the oil came up fast behind them, burning and catching them, and some of them tried to dive when it was close, but when they came up they came up into flames again and we went down the nets into the water close to the side to grab them and help them up on to the ropes, and the ones who got to us were so badly burnt that they screamed when we put our arms round their shoulders to hold them up? We were lucky in *Pelorus*, Peter we didn't have to cope with burning oil."

Peter nodded. He drank a little of his whisky, and he told me: "My father must have been in the——"

"They looked a sort of dirty grey when we got them inboard. Remember? Grey and petrified and out of their element, and a lot of them dying. I went down into the for'ard mess-deck, and there was an Indian soldier lying on his back with most of the flesh scorched off his arms and hands, and he smelt of its burning, but I couldn't think of anything I could do to help him except to light a cigarette and put it between his lips; and a sailor who'd come down the ladder after me thought that I'd given him an old cigarette—one that I'd half smoked myself. He snatched it out of the man's

mouth and lit a fresh one from his own packet of Players and put it there where mine had been and asked me: 'Christ! ain't he worth a whole one?'

"I wanted to vindicate myself—to explain that the cigarette I'd lit had in fact been new—but I was muddled with emotion and I couldn't tell it properly: I told the sailor, 'I don't smoke cigarettes, myself', and he looked at me as if he thought I was mad, and the Indian with wide, expressionless brown eyes, like a sick dog looking up at us both without any understanding——"

Peter ground a cigarette out into the ashtray which was the lid of an old tin. He didn't look up from it, but went on crushing the stub into pulp and asked me: "Can I go on now?"

"If you want to. But we were lucky, Peter. *We* didn't have flames on the sea, and *we* could all swim. Those Indians couldn't—not many of them. They were lost; you could see it in their eyes. They didn't care any more because they didn't understand; they——"

Peter had tossed back the rest of his whisky quickly, angrily.

"All right, we were lucky. Bloody lucky, weren't we? I was lucky, and my father was lucky, and we ought to be giving thanks for our luck that we weren't burnt alive or drowned. My father was in the FDP, Jimmy—the place they'd given him to sleep. He was trapped in that blasted cage and I left him in it to drown. How d'you like that, Jimmy? Am I lucky to be alive? D'you think I wouldn't swap places now with one of those men burning or drowning? Would you expect me to be glad that I came out of *Pelorus* alive?" He was staring at me as though I was his enemy, and while I looked

into his face I was conscious of an old enemy close behind me, a dead-white face falling back and a paddle in my hands. . . . He told me, looking down at the table, and his eyes half-closed as though he was praying: "I killed my own father, Jimmy. I sat and watched the red light flashing over the telephone, and I knew it was the line from the FDP and that he wouldn't have been ringing on it unless he couldn't get out. The red light was flashing, but from where I was I couldn't hear the buzz, of course. I saw that light, and I knew damn well . . . I *knew*, Jimmy, and I didn't do anything about it. I went down the starboard ladder and blew up my Mae West and dropped over the side. I killed him, Jimmy—put it any way you like, but it won't make any odds because I've tried putting it to myself in every way a man could think of: for years I've tried, and that's been no help. You see, there just *isn't* any help? Jimmy, am I still lucky that I wasn't burnt alive?"

I looked up and met his pale, hard eyes, and I was thinking: How in hell do I answer any of that? A man has standards for himself and different ones for other people: his own are mainly conditioned by his feelings, emotions, and the other comes out of objective thought or plain disinterest and an easy answer. When a man can teach himself to study his own problems as he would those of someone else, he achieves an advantage and is in a better position to direct his own life: but he isn't fit to live with.

Peter told me: "It wasn't that I hated him or even—honestly—felt that I had anything to criticise. Just that I—well, I'd been forcing myself to stick to a certain line, and in all the—the blankness of it when we were

going down—it didn't seem true, did it, not real?—in that sort of dream and disbelief and being afraid of it my mind was frozen into the past few days. I can't even try to explain; but, well, I wasn't thinking: *I'm not going to save him*. I wasn't really thinking anything at all. I just left the light flashing and I was last off the bridge, and so nobody else could have seen it or done anything about it—and he drowned. I let him drown."

Fighting my own battle more than Peter's, I argued: "Why'd he have been down there? He was always on the bridge, before, when we were closed up. Could have been anyone else—or an electrical fault. Half the circuits were busted and that lamp *could* have been flashing on its own. You can't be certain, Peter; you could be imagining the whole thing. Why should he——"

"Probably he went down to get something. Ever asked yourself what you'd keep, a time like that, just a moment and the space of a pocket or two pockets—what d'you take with you? I think he'd have taken something of Helen—something silly, and useless like a photograph."

Peter nodded at his whisky. "I expect that was it." He looked up at me quickly, and, surprisingly, he was smiling. "I'm quite a good friend of Helen's now. She's a wonderful person, Jimmy. I'd like to marry her, but of course I can't, and she thinks that what stops me is the difference in our ages. As if I'd give a damn about *that!*"

"And your mother?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"My mother is now Lady Pugh. Wife of Sir Norman Pugh. You won't have heard of him—he made his cash out of canned meat, and he found the title in one of the



blown cans. He's the Socialist M.P. for our district. They have the bloody nerve to keep a photograph of my father on nearly every mantelpiece, and my mother weeps—she calls it 'breaking down'—about three times a month to prove her grief." Peter told me, quietly: "My father was *right*, Jimmy. I know it. And I——"

"Peter. All this could be nothing much more than imagination. A sense of guilt coming out of your remembering that you wouldn't have anything to do with him, then the shock of the sinking and him not coming out of it—Peter, you couldn't *prove* this, not even to yourself."

He asked me: "Prove it?"

And I thought to myself: He can't prove what he imagines, any more than *I* can prove what I know. And I can't tell him! I should, of course. I killed the father, and after all the grovelling I've done to the memory of that crime I should, if I can be true to all I've thought over the last few years, be able to say: Peter, *I* killed your father! I thought: Yes, but *how*? One thing to tell yourself the truth, quite another to bring it out and face it in the open! In my mind I went back to it—to that sodden khaki battledress top falling back and the pale face melting into the dark waves and then suddenly the brilliance of the searchlight's beam putting its lukewarm edge on us, and—oh, suddenly, so quick and hard that I had to put a hand to my head, as though the realisation had come like a paining physical blow, suddenly I thought: *I can't prove it, either!* The picture was impersonal and that khaki clothed no individual: it could have been any one of the four sergeants, it could have been any of a hundred sailors who wore diverse and shabby garments salvaged or stolen

from Lord knows where: there was always a lot of khaki battle-dress about. . . . In an attempt to soothe Peter's agony I'd broken my own nightmare. Some of it. And now, I could help him.

"Peter. You've given me your version. Will you listen to mine?"

He nodded, not very interested, more surprised that I should have anything relevant to say.

"Well?"

So I told him about the float and about Lofty and about the man in khaki. Only in telling it I put it the way it had been to me for years—that the man I'd killed had been Major Simon Tregarth. It wasn't an easy story to tell, and I'd come to the end of it before I looked up and saw that he was laughing silently with his shoulders shaking and a beastly sort of amused pain in his eyes.

"Please, Jimmy. Really. Very nice of you to try to help, but it's rubbish, isn't it? You haven't changed, you know, Jimmy. You always made the most awful bloody mess of trying to help people. Thanks, Jimmy, I—but you know, this is *real*, I've—"

"Peter. When your father fell back away from the float, just as that beam found us and showed him up—as he—just then, the light was astonishingly bright, and I saw that under the side of his chin he had a puckered, V-shaped scar. *Now* d'you believe me? Did he have a scar like that? Are you going to tell me that I dreamt it?"

Peter didn't answer. He sat there with his fists on the table in front of him, white-knuckled, and between them his glass stood empty. The only sound was that of the tide rattling and purring along the submarine's

tanks. Peter relaxed his fists and he put his right hand out to the whisky bottle, found it without looking at it and moved it closer to his glass; but then he stopped, as though he'd woken out of a dream. He looked at the bottle and took his hand away from it, and I thought, happily but hardly believing: He doesn't need it—not now. Peter held both his hands up under his face and stared at their palms, then suddenly put them down flat side by side on the table. I heard him say, quietly but very clearly, "Thank God." Then he rested his head on his hands and he was crying like a small child. That was the way I left him.

There may have been an early boat that I could have caught, but I didn't like the idea of a conversation at this hour with the gangway watch, and in any case I wanted some fresh air. So I walked out through the Fort over the road that I'd known so well, and I walked all the way into Gosport to catch the first car ferry. I could have gone over the bridge to the penny ferry, but it wasn't far enough to walk, and in any case I'd have had to wait at least an hour for the first trip over.

While I walked I was thinking about how the smallest incident—well, accident—can play so big a part in men's lives: that scar, for instance, under Simon Tregarth's chin. I'd seen it on our first evening out of Alexandria—I'd been half-way up the ladder to the bridge, and the soldier had started coming down, using the wrong ladder because there was one for coming up and one for going down, both of them were narrow and certainly not wide enough for two-way traffic. The light outside the charthouse was shining up, and as we met I saw the V-scar under his chin. . . . Odd, but I'd

had no *récollection* of it at all—not until I was searching my mind for some way to convince Peter; then somehow the thing was handed to me, and it worked, and Peter believed me; but I couldn't honestly believe that the accomplishment was my own. 'Someone or something had helped.

I passed Haslar hospital with lights gleaming on its first floor and all the other windows dark; I turned left and inland along the line of the creek. I felt happy—almost excited with happiness. It was a way I hadn't felt for years.

THE END



